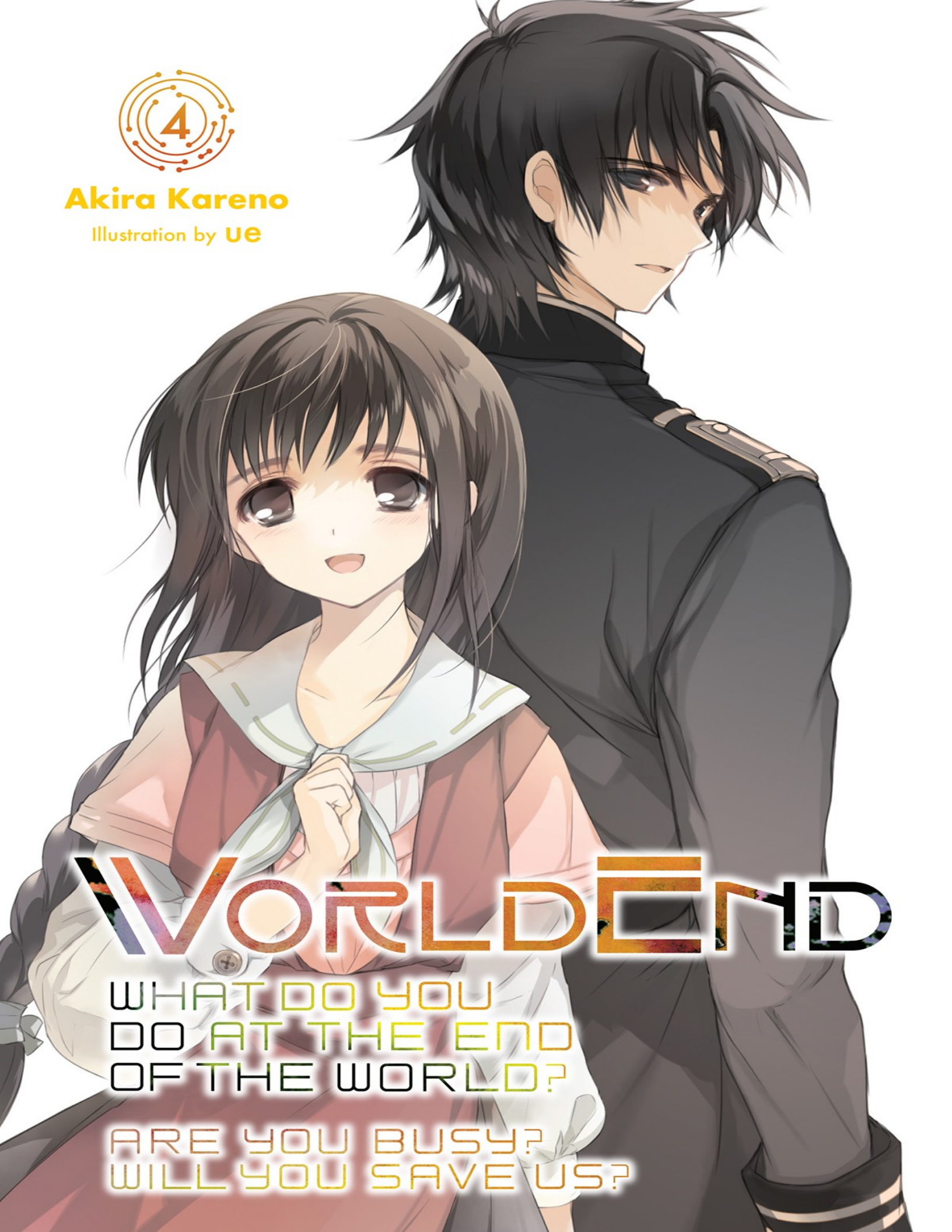




Akira Karenno

Illustration by **UE**



WORLDEND

WHAT DO YOU
DO AT THE END
OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY?
WILL YOU SAVE US?

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Almaria

I think whoever ends up as Dad's lover will be in for a real headache. He's such a stereotype—he values his family over a romantic relationship.

Yeah, I know.

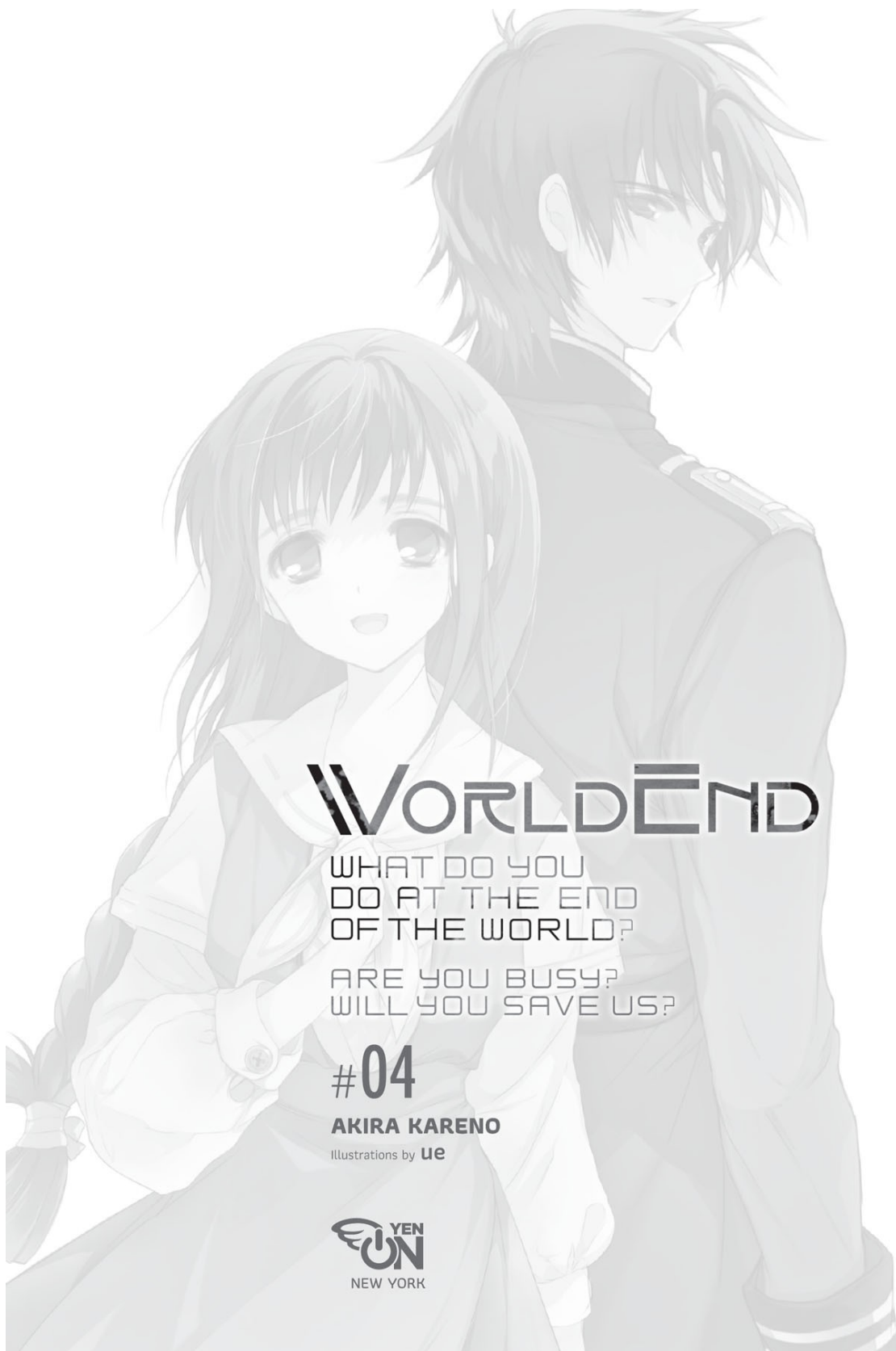
The one he values the most is his favorite daughter—me.

Because of the way he is, I'm sure that won't change until he's in his grave.

That makes me feel so happy.

...And a little guilty.





WORLDEND

WHAT DO YOU
DO AT THE END
OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY?
WILL YOU SAVE US?

#04

AKIRA KARENO

Illustrations by ue


NEW YORK

Copyright

WORLDEND: WHAT DO YOU DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD? ARE YOU BUSY? WILL YOU SAVE US?

AKIRA KARENO

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by ue

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SUKUTTEMORATTEIIDESUKA? Vol. 4

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Beyond Severed Hope
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Beyond Severed Hope

-despair and desire-

There was something inside her that believed *that girl*, of all people, might make it. She wanted to believe in miracles. But reality marched onward in ways that had nothing to do with her wishes.

The Winged Guard's high-speed ship collected a single corpse from the surface.

It was a *thing* that, not too long ago, was Chtholly Nota Seniorious.

Nygglatho left the room and closed the door behind her.

Without taking a step, she leaned her back against the hallway wall and slowly slid down to the floor.

The low rumbling of the enchanted furnace swayed her body. The wild idea that likened it to being in her mother's womb quickly crossed her mind. But the thought was out of place, and her logic quickly shattered the momentary impulse—this was not a place where life was coming into being but merely where life had been lost, and the site of lives that would one day be lost.

She was here, in a medium-size Winged Guard patrol ship, one that typically made its rounds among the islands in the 20s.

"What you sssaw wasss painful, I sssee."

The enormous lizardfolk who summoned Nygglatho to this patrol ship spoke gently to her in a low, heavy tone.

"Faerie ssoldierss lossst in battle typically do not leave their hussksss behind. They ssshatter into dropss of light and ssscatter to the wind... It wass jussst ass you ssaid. Chtholly wasss no longer a faerie."

"Yeah."

Nygglatho returned a half-hearted answer, her eyes still trained on the floor.

There, in the room, was a thing that had probably been Chtholly not too long ago.

Had she been crushed? Cut? Stabbed? Sliced? Either way, a multitude of wounds decorated the hunk of flesh to the point where it no longer looked like a girl. But it was the tears in her muscles and tendons, likely caused by Chtholly pushing herself beyond her limits, that had injured her body far worse—and far deeper.

Nygglatho unwittingly covered her mouth with both hands. She desperately forced the wail brewing in her throat back down. At the same

time, she didn't bother holding back or hiding the tears that welled in her eyes. Unlike other multi-limbed demon races, a mere troll such as her had only two arms. And—

“She really fought her hardest, didn't she?”

—because she was a troll, with a single glance at the state of that girl's flesh, she could tell right away how violent of a battle she must have endured, and with such intense emotion.

The girl probably didn't spare a single thought for her damaged body as she fought.

The closer she got to death, the brighter the venenum inside her must have burned. Her kindled power was enough to force her breaking body to move, prolonging the reckless battle. Her flesh torn, her bones broken, her blood spilled, and yet, it would still throw whatever life she had left to the battle before it.

“What ssshall we do about the funeral? Will it be a demon funeral?”

In Regule Aire, where various races and cultures and views of life and death all mingled together, there were different ways of treating the dead: Burn them. Bury them. Expose them to the wind and feed them to the birds. Dip them in scented oil and preserve the remains. Have the local government collect them as refuse. Et cetera, et cetera.

Demon funerals were one of the more typical methods of internment. The procedure was simple—they would call on a troll mortician and let them eat the corpse. A being who had spent its life consuming others' lives to live was suited to nourish the lives of another... Or some logic like that.

“...Let's not.”

Nygglotho was also a qualified mortician. If she was to announce her intentions to take the part here and now, it would probably be easy to get permission.

But she couldn't bring herself to do it.

All the previous faerie soldiers who had died for their cause simply vanished into motes of light, without being mourned. Even if she had actually become something different, she hesitated to treat Chtholly as an exception. And—

“That flesh is already empty. I don't know much about souls or venenum, but I can tell just by looking that it's something that's already purged itself of all its feelings and life force. I can't consume flesh that has nothing to pass on to me.”

“Hmm.”

Their conversation came to an end.

Her waves of emotion were still thrashing violently about, but she managed to somehow stop her shaking voice and tears.

Nygglotho stood.

“...By the way, what happened to the other two? They shouldn't have fallen too far from her. You didn't find them with her?”

“About that.”

The lizardfolk's gaze roamed about, hesitant.

"We have information that iss definite and one thing that iss uncertain. Which would you like to hear firsst?"

What is that supposed to mean? she thought.

Was it supposed to be good news and bad news? In that case, she could've just easily said, *Tell me the good news and don't say any more.* Either way, right now she didn't want to hear anything that would sink her mood any lower.

"...Your definite information, then, please."

"The Firsst Beasst appeared on-site. That iss why the sssurfacsse exploration ended in the middle of invesstigation, and why we can no longer explore any more."

"Is it strong?"

"That iss beyond our comprehenssion. Sssince ancient hisstory, there iss no one who hass fought with thisss Beasst."

That wasn't something she wanted to hear.

"Then—"

"We cannot fight it. Just by approaching the Firsst Beasst, everything csseassssesss to be. Both form and life are lossst, only to become sssand."

This Beast harbored no malice, no spite, no murderous intent. It simply *was*—a perfect menace. No one could get close to it or touch it, which meant no one could contend with it. There was no chance to even think of battle.

And so, they could not even search for a memento of the other two who had been lost to the land along with Chtholly—Willem Kmetsch and Nephren Ruq Insania.

"...I see."

Still leaning on the wall, Nygglotho tightly wrapped her arms around herself.

"And that's your definite information. What about the other?"

She expected nothing as she pressed forward.

She was at rock bottom now. There was nothing more he could say that could make her feel worse than this. With a careless spirit, she embraced the confidence.

"The Great Sssage ussed long-forgotten techniquesss to ssearch for Willem. It'sss called heartbeat detection or sssomething of the ssort, which apparently allowss him to tracsse anyone alive to the endsss of the earth."

—*Huh?*

Things had just taken a strange turn.

The Great Sage was the leading figure in the establishment of Regule Aire. Of course, he was easily over five hundred years old, and with his library of ancient techniques, he had superior insight compared to regular folk. He was a legendary figure, one who would continue to keep Regule Aire safe, as he always did. That was how the story went in children's picture books and the academies' textbooks.

And—as much as she couldn't believe it when she first heard it—according to Willem, who was a living legend in his own right, he and the Great Sage were apparently old friends. While she felt mystified that the Great Sage so graciously used legendary techniques out of worry over Willem's fate, she wasn't surprised. But—

“It allows him to trace anyone alive...which means...”

“The result indicated that man is *ssomewhere on the sssurface*.”

“—?!”

Nygglotho gulped.

No. It can't be. Impossible.

But still, that means it can be. But, but—

“We cannot draw any conclusions yet. Given that even a technique used by the venerable Great Sage offers only a vague result of *ssomewhere*, *ssomething ssstrange* is afoot. And yet...”

And yet, it was still possible.

The fact that an ancient art for discovering the whereabouts of a living being provided an answer at all, however imperfect, gave birth to a small hope within her.

“That warrior may yet stand on a battlefield *ssomewhere*.”

“Wah...”

A weird voice slipped out.

“Waaah!”

Then came the tears that she thought she'd held back. Then a cry she thought she had finally swallowed. Both these things leaped forth for reasons completely different from earlier. And the troll's two limbs could not stop either of them.

She knew this was unconfirmed information. It didn't mean he was alive, and of course, it didn't guarantee the survival of the girl who had been with him, Nephren. And yet, she couldn't keep herself from connecting the dots.

Hope killed despair. She could not embrace hope if she wanted to spare herself any more pain. Though she understood that logically, she couldn't find a way to suppress the joy that welled up from within her.

Like a cradle, the enchanted furnace rocked back and forth.

Like a baby, the troll woman wailed and wailed.



In a Sweet and Gentle Dream
-puppets onstage-

In a Sweet and Gentle Dream

-puppets onstage-

1. Father and Daughter

Almaria Duffner didn't know her mother's face.

Even by the time she'd become fully aware of her surroundings, the only family was her father.

And she didn't know her father very well, either.

He was almost never home. During the day, he worked exchanging money, and he spent the nights with his lover.

Sometimes, he would return to the apartment to check on his daughter, silently confirming that she was still alive. When he did return, he would take the opportunity to leave on the table the smallest amount of money possible that she could survive on. That was essentially all the communication that ever passed between them.

And so, the little girl lived by herself.

She grew up without depending on anyone, without being able to depend on anyone.

It happened one day when she was seven.

Her father, who had dirtied his hands with some sort of crime, was stabbed by his accomplice.

And of course, the girl was chased out of the apartment.

Without any other relatives, the girl was sent to a public institution run by the city of Gomag—or she was supposed to be. Instead, there, an old man (probably) who had apparently investigated her father's crimes spoke up. He said it must have been fate that he happened to be there at the time and asked for permission to bring her to his orphanage.

Neither the guards nor the bureaucrats there had any reason to oppose his idea. And of course, the girl herself lacked the emotional energy to voice her opinion, as she could barely keep up with the sudden changes of the environment around her.



The old man took her to an aged wooden building.

Starting today, this is your home, he told her. But Almaria ignored him.

And these guys here, they're your family—she let those words go in one ear and out the other, too. To her, *home* was that small apartment room,

and *family* was her father, whose face she barely ever saw. She couldn't understand these new entities that would be taking their place.

One boy seemed to have noticed the two of them and rushed over.

When the old man saw who it was, he announced to the boy, *We have a new family member today.*

The boy peered at the girl.

Gee, don't you look thrilled.

The girl cast a glance at him, then immediately looked away. She was not in the state of mind to talk to anyone at the time, much less to children who were rude to people they just met.

Hey, c'mon, how old are you?

She ignored him.

Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I'm the big kid around here anyway.

She ignored him.

Listen, now that you're here, we're family. Since I'm the big kid here, that makes me the big brother. I'll even give you special permission to call me bro.

She ignored him.

Man, you're not cute at all.

After a little while, the boy gave up interacting with the girl and went off somewhere to sulk. The girl spared a single glance at his back, then dropped her gaze to her feet.

Leave me alone, she thought.

She didn't need a family. Even if one was suddenly thrust upon her, she wouldn't know how to deal with them. If they simply left her alone, she could live how she pleased.

She saw the old man shrug in defeat.

And then, that night.

A sudden change in environment. A never-ending state of tension. Underdeveloped physical and mental resilience.

As a matter of course, the girl fell ill.

She developed a high fever and became bedridden.

Her head felt heavy, every breath was grueling, and pain racked her chest.

In her hazy consciousness, Almaria wondered if this was the end for her.

She knew logically that she was being a bit overly pessimistic. But the careless thought that she would probably be okay even if she did actually die bubbled up in her mind. Now that she thought about it, she never really had the strong desire to live in the first place. It wouldn't be terrible for a life that held so little meaning to end here.

Then something cool rested on her forehead.

Her mind still fuzzy, she didn't realize it was a wet towel. All she thought was that it felt a little nice. Just a little.

Hmph.

Here you are, makin' me do all this, and you're not even cute.

She couldn't quite hear the insult, either.

Whoever said it frequently changed the towels as they helped relieve her fever. The water in the bucket eventually became lukewarm, and he even went out to draw new water from the well in the darkness of night.

As he did all that, the girl's consciousness regained a slight bit of clarity. She was faintly aware that someone was by her side.

Oh crap, it's late.

She thought she heard this someone say something in surprise.

This is bad. If I don't go to bed now, I won't be able to get up in the morning.

The person stood. She didn't exactly hear what they were mumbling to themselves about, but she could tell they were going to leave.

Her hand moved on its own.

Her fingers weakly pinched the person's sleeve.

" — ad — "

Her mouth moved on its own, too.

" — on't go — Da — "

She pleaded—in such a small, quivering voice that even she couldn't hear what she said.

The someone trying to leave was perplexed.

After a moment of hesitation, they sat back down.

Don't worry.

Your dad is here. And he's not going anywhere.

She saw through his lie right away.

Almaria's real father was dead. Even when he was alive, he barely spoke to his daughter, much less fuss over her with gentle words.

And yet, the girl clung to the lie.

She searched for her "dad's" hand and desperately gripped it with all she had. She wanted someone to stay by her side, so she leaned on whoever was there with her whole heart and soul. She searched for true warmth from a fake father.

And sure enough, his warm hand tenderly squeezed the girl's hand back.

"D...ad..."

Yeah?

She called for him, and he responded.

I'm happy, she thought.

Someone was with her when she wanted them to be. She even had the twisted thought that perhaps if that was enough to make her happy, then there was nothing happier in the entire world.

Later, this was how the boy in question talked about the night.

He said it wasn't too unusual a sight here at the orphanage. Losing parents and undergoing a sudden change in living arrangements were the main factors that caused their new family members to fall ill. He said he'd seen that happen to the kids countless times.

In fact, it was pretty normal for kids to call out for their moms and dads when that happened.

Everyone there had lost all the family they ever knew before coming to a place full of strangers. Of course they'd be unhappy. It was unreasonable to think they could just power through it all. So at night, when they're drained both physically and emotionally, the words slip from their mouths. It wasn't unusual at all. It was a path that everyone at this orphanage had walked before.

So she needn't think of it as something embarrassing or shameful. He told her he would forget all about it and that she should, too... The boy waved his hand lightly as he said all that stuff.

"...No."

Almaria rejected his goodwill with such certainty that it even surprised herself.

He was so warm, you see. He had been so reassuring. So kind. She didn't want to pretend like such a precious memory of hers never happened for the stupid reason that it was expected, that it happened all the time.

"I would hate to forget all that...*Dad.*"

The boy scrunched up his face.

Seriously, if you're going to call me anything, it'd better be Big Bro, 'cause I don't wanna be anyone's dad at this age—the boy sheepishly started to ramble on. He certainly didn't exude any dignity or presence that would warrant anyone calling him "Father" at the moment, but—

"But, Willem, you don't strike me as a big brother at all."

Yeah, so then, doesn't that mean I'm even less like a dad?!

"That's different."

It's the same! Why are you so obsessed with the idea of treating me like your parent?

"Well, that's..."

After a moment of thought, she said:

"A secret."

Like a spoiled child, she closed one eye and stuck out her tongue.



— She opened her eyes.



She passed the time gazing blankly in the darkness at the ceiling before her.

She could hear the faint sounds of birds coming from beyond the window. *Dawn is breaking soon*, she thought.

"Mm..."

She felt like she had just been in a long dream.

She also got the sense that she hadn't totally woken up from it yet.

It hadn't been a bad dream... Or it hadn't felt like one. At the very least, it was different from the nightmare that she suffered from when she was little.

Her head was heavy. She couldn't think well.

She quickly sat up in bed, lightly shook her head, and slipped on her slippers. Still in a dreamy state of mind, she left her room. The tattered wooden floorboards creaked beneath her steps as she walked down the hall.

Then...

"Oh—"

She saw him in the room.

There was familiar black hair and serene features. His tall and lanky body seemed too big for the worn sofa he lay on.

"...Dad?"

At that moment, her consciousness snapped into clarity, like the dawn parting the morning mist.

She remembered who she was, why she'd come to this room, and what it was she had to do next.

"No, wait."

She doubled back to the hallway, her slippers pit-pattering against the floor.

Morning at the orphanage was busy. There was lots she had to do. She wanted to open all the windows before the sun rose, and she had to get preparations for breakfast ready before the little ones woke up. And since one of the family was home unexpectedly, she wanted to make breakfast just a little fancier than usual.

Today would probably be the first busy day in a long time.

"You should at least send word before you come home, you stupid father figure."

He would wake up soon enough. Then the first words out of his mouth would be a complaint that he was hungry.

It was always that way. She doubted if he was actually hungry, but her *dad* would always ask for food after coming home. It was like he was trying to make up for the days he was away all at once.

"All right. I suppose we'll get this started."

She chuckled softly and pulled out her favorite apron.

2. The Foreigners

Willem knew he couldn't fight anymore.

He would die if he forced himself onto a battlefield. He was full and ready for that.

He had accepted all these facts in a positive manner. The girls would head to battle. He would send them off from a safe place—he was okay with that, too.

And yet.

When a Beast attacked the airship *Plantaginesta*, naturally, he chose to fight. He chose to leave Chtholly as she slept, set his venenum aflame, and concentrate on nothing but pummeling his enemies.

Rhantolk, whom he had met on the battlefield, characterized his actions as “trying to commit suicide with Chtholly as the excuse.” And that was probably the most accurate way to describe him at that time.

As Willem killed his enemies, he was killing himself.

He held on tightly to his decision to keep the girls safe even as he gave up on everything else.

He used the battlefield for his self-centered wish. He squashed his own resolution of being the one to wait for the girls to come home.

He did what he could. He also did things he shouldn’t have been able to do.

For the first time in a long time, he set his venenum ablaze at full strength. His blood churned, and he heard his flesh burning right in his ear. If fighting would kill him anyway, then there was no point in holding back. And if he wouldn’t be able to fight anymore, then it didn’t matter how hard or painful it was. He would run wilder than he had ever before.

His wish should have come true.

Willem Kmetsch, second enchantments officer of the Winged Guard and manager of the faerie warehouse, should have lost his life in the intense battle.



The birds were singing. It was a nice morning.

“Yawn... Hah.”

Willem sat on the roof of the orphanage and bit back his yawn.

With his eyes watering slightly, he examined his surroundings.

Before him was a familiar townscape, as he always remembered it.

The greenery he could see in the distance was the Adams’ shared farmland. Sitting stoutly just in front of that was the chapel. The colorful brick roofs scattered about the area were all cheap apartments, and the red flag waving in the wind at the very edge of the residential cluster was the sign of the Adventurers Guild. Even farther away, past the irrigation canal, was the Gomag city center.

Smoke rose from several chimneys.

The people living in this world were getting ready for breakfast.

Right. These people were getting ready to live through the day.

Of course, none of this could be real.

The land, along with the race of the emnetwiht who thrived on it, had been destroyed long ago.

The history books said it had taken place over five hundred years ago. The invaders, the Beasts, appeared right in the middle of the emnetwiht empire, just by the royal castle.

These beings were incredibly strong, their numbers were great, and they were fast. These invaders were too quick for any military in history to do anything about them, and they tore into the world. In a few scant days, several of the major city-states established by the empire had vanished.

It wasn't only the emnetwiht who disappeared. Everything on the earth was indiscriminately swallowed up: grass; trees; animals; bugs; any races that were hostile toward them, like the elves. Everything—as though just existing was a sin in and of itself—was devoured.

The real surface was now nothing more than a dried-up wasteland occupied mostly by gray sandstorms.

The very few who survived followed the Great Sage's lead and escaped to the floating islands in the heavens. There, they established a meager society already in decline. And of course, the races that didn't survive never even had that option.

"Damn it."

Willem cursed quietly under his breath so no one could hear.

The emnetwiht are gone. My hometown doesn't exist anymore. He told himself this over and over again. The scenery before him was like a diary—just something for him to recall memories of days gone by, to let him wallow in nostalgia.

This wasn't where he was supposed to return to. His home was far above in the sky.

"It's so big."

A murmur.

He could hear Nephren sitting right beside him, murmuring in the official language of the Regule Aire island cluster.

"What island is this?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you look like you know."

She said it in a way that made it strangely hard for him to either confirm or deny.

"...This is the Imperial city of Gomag, and beneath us is the Foreigner Memorial Orphanage. How thaaankful we are to have an orphanage established and supposedly operated by the great eighteenth Legal Brave, Nils D. Foreigner."

Nephren, who rarely ever showed expression, seemed somewhat quizzical.

"Operated by a Brave? I've never heard of that before... By Imperial, do you mean Island No. 6?"

"There're no Braves in Regule Aire, y'know. We're on the surface."

Nephren's expression grew even more confused. It was sort of amusing.

"You know both Braves and the surface don't exist anymore, right?"

"That's the problem. The land was destroyed five hundred years ago." Willem checked around them as he answered. "But this is, without a doubt, the scenery of my hometown just as I remember it."

Nephren followed his gaze.

"...This is the surface from long ago?"

"Yep."

"So that means there's no land underneath this?"

"Of course not."

It wasn't much of a question, but he understood what she meant.

Nephren was a modern kid, born and raised on Regule Aire. And so, the idea that what she saw before her could exist only on an island of limited space was common sense imprinted in her mind. A short walk would bring her to the edge, and peering down, she would be able to see the gray expanse of the surface below. That sense was embedded into her.

Even if she understood it logically as fact, an endless fertile land was beyond her imagination.

"That mountain looks really far away, though."

She pointed off into the distance.

"Yeah, it is. From here to there's about the same distance as Island No. 68 from end to end."

"And the ground keeps going beyond that?"

"Yeah. There's a pretty big town about a two day's cart ride out. And past that..." The map of the Empire spread out in his mind. *"...is mostly farmland for a while, and then on the other side of the river is a big forest that eventually leads into a mountain range... That's about where our war zone with the elves starts."*

"...I feel a little sick."

"Yeah, I know. It happens when you think about something that goes against all logic."

"But the surface was destroyed."

"Yep."

"Then what kind of trick is this?"

"It's...probably..."

As he answered, Willem checked his chest. He could see the piece of metal hanging from a string around his neck was faintly glowing with the light of venenum.

It was a talisman with the power of language comprehension. It activated with the slightest bit of venenum from the wearer and conveyed others' intentions via the medium of words.

It was an extremely handy little thing, but it had its drawbacks.

Understanding language didn't always bring about good outcomes. There were "attacks," like lies and abuse, that first had meaning through being transmitted. So understanding every language meant that these "attacks" hit hard. Since it indiscriminately allowed all outside messages to pass through while the talisman was active, resistance to spirit-interference attacks dropped dramatically. It hadn't been a problem living on Regule Aire, so he had totally forgotten about it.

The talisman was ignoring Willem's will and acting in this manner.

"...A dream, maybe."

She trained a sharp, cool gaze on him.

"Wait, not like that. Of course, it's not just a regular dream; I mean we might be under the influence of an attack with that kind of ability."

Willem was once active as a Quasi Brave all across the globe, and he had fought a demon like that.

Demons were a spirit race that evolved specifically to drag virtuous emnetwiht into depravity. They had plenty of tricks to entice their targets to abandon their self-control or convictions. One of their tricks was a type of spiritual attack that used a dreamworld.

"It's a specially made dreamworld that's a reflection of the target's memories, designed to be infinitely similar when compared to what they perceive as reality. The only goal is to make the target be completely comfortable living in this world. Be careful—the second you give up on the will to get outta here, that means they win."

"Then this dream is exactly like the surface from long ago."

"It probably thinks this scenery is enough to beat me."

It was actually a very effective attack. Just by sitting and looking around, Willem worried his heart might melt from nostalgia and longing... But as long as he was conscious of it, he could resist. He could steel himself and keep himself from giving in to the temptation.

"A dreamworld..."

Nephren murmured, cautiously reaching up to pinch her own cheek.

Her soft-looking skin stretched out far.

"Ouch. Is this really a dream?"

He could see her eyes watering slightly.

"Its selling point is a dream you can't wake up from, so it's not gonna break that easily."

"Then what would happen if we sat here and did nothing?"

"Our enemy's goal is to convince us to live at ease in this world. So it'll play with the world and reach out to us."

"Play with it?"

"It's the creator of this world, right? Apart from meddling with us directly, it can do whatever it wants using the memories as base material. There were demons who specialized in this kinda temptation. They had plenty of ways of doing stuff. Aeshma cause everyone to die one by one, but bufas demons will come attack you directly, while ammon demons try to get you with loads of gold and treasures and stuff. And I fought with a succubus once..."

Succubi were the kind of demon who tried to drag emnetwiht into depravity by forcibly granting sexual wishes. So when Willem had been trapped in that dream, the world was filled with those kinds of temptations.

It was hard to explain that in detail to a little girl.

(I couldn't look Lillia or Emissa directly in the eye for a while after that...)

"Well, forget about that one."

"What kind of dream did the succubus show you?"

Nephren tilted her head. Please don't be curious about this.

"We will forget about that one."

He forcibly changed the subject.

"I don't know what the enemy is, but I'm pretty positive that I'm the target."

It was hard to imagine that Nephren here...was a fake, a part of the dream. She was too out of place for the past-surface setting. He was pretty positive that she was the real thing but had somehow gotten mixed up in this whole ordeal.

"So as long as I hold on to the desire to get out of here, it'll make adjustments to the world to break me. That'll be our chance. That's when we'll track down the enemy's true form and move to counterattack."

"Do we have to counterattack?"

"Of course we do. If we just sit like this forever, we'll never get out."

"Do we have to get out?"

.....

"If we get out, both you and I will die immediately."

She was probably right.

Their spirits had been caught in the instant before their death in the real world and were now in this dream. It was a distinct possibility that their bodies in reality were now nothing more than corpses.

Or maybe all the time they spent in the dreamworld would be nothing more than a fraction of a second in the real world. In that case, it was possible that escaping would return them to bodies just barely alive. But even then, he could easily imagine that they'd still reach the same end just a few seconds later.

"We have nowhere to return to."

"...That's not the problem, okay?" Willem protested, as though trying to convince himself. "Don't get weird ideas in your head. Once you lose the will to get out, you'll end up living in this dream forever. I might be the enemy's target, but that doesn't mean you're safe, okay?"

"...Okay."

Nephren nodded and fell silent.

He wondered what was up.

She had always been an otherworldly girl, whose strange actions and words stood out—but the sense of unease he felt about her now was different than usual. Her expression was as vacant as it always was, but he could just barely make out the emotions lurking beneath.

Nephren was hesitant about something.

Come ooon, Daaaaaad!

Someone called to him in the Imperial language from below.

It felt like something had gripped his chest the moment he heard that voice.

He leaned forward to look down, and Almaria...*something* that looked like Almaria stood in the doorway, waving at him.

His heart felt like it was going to be ripped to pieces.

Almaria. Her face, her voice— How much had he wept when he lost her? How much pain had he gone through to give up on her? Even if he never got over her, how much had he been saved simply by managing to soothe the pain? As though negating all the hardships Willem went through the past two years, there she was now. He could hear her voice.

Why are you up there?! Breakfast's ready!

"What is she saying?"

Nephren could only understand Regule Aire's common language.

"Breakfast. For now, we'll think about what comes next after we eat."

"...Okay."

Nephren nodded.

"Don't worry— Al's a good cook. She's practically on par with Nygglotho..."

After he said that much, he quietly added, *"Except when it comes to meat."* A troll's understanding and attachment to meat was beyond emnetwiht comprehension. Though Almaria was good, she was no match for...whatever that was. Actually, he'd prefer if she didn't win regardless.

"That's not really what I'm worried about."

"Hmm? Then what is it?"

He asked casually, but Nephren didn't answer. She silently kindled her venenum, sprouted phantasmal white-gray wings from her back, and dropped down from the roof.

Faerie wings weren't physical objects and totally disregarded the laws of physics, though those two things weren't necessarily related. Nephren glided without flapping them once, landed on the ground, and her wings vanished.

He could hear Almaria cry out in shock. Of course she would. Regular people who weren't Braves or Adventurers or Chevaliers weren't used to the sight of girls coming down from the sky.

Hoo boy.

As he scratched the back of his head, Willem, too, put a slight spark to his venenum.

With a short *bang*, he leaped into the air. His enhanced leg strength catapulted him skyward with vigor that far surpassed what was possible for a regular person.

He adjusted his position slightly in midair and landed on the ground right next to Nephren.

The shape of the soles of his shoes was imprinted deep into the ground. Dust curled up around him.

"Willem...?!"

"I'm fine."

Nephren was looking at him, worried, but he stopped her and checked himself.

He didn't feel any pain.

He hopped a few times in place. No problems there. The venenum Willem Kmetsch activated was moving properly throughout his entire body, like it was supposed to be.

Huh. It seemed like the powers they had in the real world, minus the physical damage to their bodies, had been imported right into the dreamworld. Without the injury to his body, he could once again make use of the powers he had cultivated as a Quasi Brave and the battle techniques he thought he would never be able to use again.

"Oh, to pick up where we left off?"

"Yeah?"

"What happens in the dreams with the succubus demon?"

"...Forget about that."



There was a building on the outskirts of the city of Gomag.

Its official name was the Imperial Gomag City Foreigner Memorial Orphanage. How grateful we all are that the great eighteenth Legal Brave, Nils D. Foreigner, privately funded and founded this orphanage... And the only thing great about it was its name and history—everything else, not so much.

In one word, it was shabby. In two words, it was really shabby.

The building, a fairly large one at two stories tall, was made from aged wood. The walls and roof were mostly patchwork, as though repeatedly assembled by amateur hands. Since it was a remodel of an elementary school that was originally going to be demolished, its history was on par with the stone buildings everywhere else. It was an incredibly unreliable building, one that might end up blown away in a big storm, foundation and all.

And that was the private orphanage.

At the moment, twenty-one children lived there. All given up by useless adults, they were still alive, full of vigor and energy.

Willem Kmetsch lived at this orphanage.

Actually, he had barely been back the past five years. What with training to become a Brave and the missions he went on after becoming a Quasi Brave, he didn't really have the time. And yet, as always, he considered himself a resident of the orphanage.

Most of the children who had come to the orphanage only recently caught sight of the unfamiliar older man and were clearly scared of him. But when Willem gave them his toothy grin, their caution vanished. It was only times like this that his undignified looks really helped.

And the responses from the older kids who already knew Willem (most were around ten years old) were pretty easy to read, too—

“Hey, Dad, you’re home!”

“Come on—teach me how to use a sword! You promised you were gonna teach me last time, remember?!”

“Where were you fighting this time? Didja smash a bunch of elves in the face?”

They crowded around him, all pestering him at once.

“Hey, guys, how’ve ya been?!”

He hugged, pinched cheeks, and ruffled hair for each and every one of them, boys and girls alike.

The children were yelping and hollering in delight.

“Come now, everyone, and Dad, too— Don’t do that while we’re about to eat. It’s bad manners!”

Almaria scolded them, and they all sat down properly in their chairs. They began to eat.

Sour-sweet dressing drizzled over a bitter salad—the combination of flavors he had almost forgotten made his stomach ache.

Everything he wanted to protect...

The home he wanted to return to...

The people he wanted to see again...

The voices he wanted to hear once more...

The reason why he kept clumsily swinging his sword...

He wouldn’t say it was all here. But almost everything he had once lost—and the pain he had suffered through for that and lamented as he gave up on it all—was, without question, here, in this place. It had taken the form of a gaggle of children and was right in front of him.

And yet, they weren’t real. And for his heart to waver over them would be, in the end, nothing but betrayal to the real Almaria...to the real children who died 527 years ago.

He felt like he was going to cry, just by talking to them. He wanted to hug them all.

A thought suddenly came to him. What would happen if he didn’t hold back on this impulse? How would she respond if he suddenly embraced his daughter?

—*Hey, come on! The children are watching!*

At first, she would probably complain. But she wouldn’t resist. And then

—

—*Sheesh. You’re such an embarrassment, Dad.*

—*You may look big on the outside, but you’re still a kid on the inside.*

That’s how she would accept it.

With a roll of the eyes but a kind voice, she would hug him back.

He could imagine it easily. And that made him sad.

“Dad?”

“What?”

"All those faces you make always creep me out."

Hey, that's mean. You actually hurt my feelings.

"You always come home real suddenly, don't you?"

There was a hint of displeasure in Almaria's voice, her statement reproachful.

"The old man's the same. I know that's probably what Brave work is like, but don't you think enough's enough?"

She was grumbling as she spoke, but her expression was bright and her steps light.

Willem knew well that many parts of his daughter's personality weren't totally honest. That's why he couldn't take her complaints at face value.

He readjusted himself in his chair and looked to her again out of the corner of his eye.

She seemed a little smaller than he remembered— No, she was definitely a size smaller. Why was that?

He found his answer right away. He held back his urge to laugh.

In reality, it had been an unbelievable five hundred years, so he almost forgot, but Willem Kmetsch had been sixteen on the last night he met with Almaria. After that, he spent almost two years living on Regule Aire. He had gotten taller during that time.

He had undergone two years' worth of change over 527 years. Physically, his body matured from that of a sixteen-year-old to an eighteen-year-old. But Almaria hadn't changed at all. And the difference was now presenting itself as a sense of unease.

It was also how he could clearly tell she wasn't real.

"...Hey. Is there something weird about me today?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Like what?"

"How you ask stuff like that."

Right. He couldn't argue with that.

"Also, I guess you look like Falco when he's about to cry after a bad dream—and how restless you seem even though you're here."

...Right. Is that it?

His thought process cooled slightly.

Almaria had just looked just a bit smaller to Willem. So in reverse, he should look considerably older to Almaria. The real one would have absolutely noticed and pointed it out.

The fact that didn't happen meant this girl was for sure a fake.

"Hey, Dad?" One of the girls tugged lightly at his sleeve. "Who's that?"

Nephren didn't understand the emnetwiht language. But still, when someone looked at her, she responded. She lifted her gaze and tilted her head lightly. "What?"

"You were just fighting in the north, right, Dad? Is that where she's from?"

"Oh, uh..." He gave it a bit of thought but couldn't think of a reason that really made sense, so he just responded, "Yeah, you could say that."

"What is it?"

"They're asking about you. I can't answer them honestly, so I'm hoping they'll eat up the lie."

"...Okay."

Nephren nodded and resumed munching on her food.

"Her hair is so pretty. It's like silver but different."

"Yeah... Guess you're right."

Among the faeries, most of whom had outlandish hair colors, Nephren's hair was a relatively normal color. And so, while it did seem a little unusual to them, she wouldn't be found out as "not normal."

"And so what's her deal?" Almaria asked as she brought over another bowl of salad for seconds. "At first, I thought maybe she was supposed to stay with us, since you brought her over all of a sudden, but...she was just flying, wasn't she?"

"Uh..."

The orphanage operated with the support of the city of Gomag, but the kids who'd been taken in weren't limited to residents of the city. There were quite the number of abandoned children who the director, who was Willem's master as well as the one the children called "old man," picked up from battlegrounds here and there.

"Nah, of course not. Guess you could call her my junior."

"Your junior," Almaria repeated dubiously. "Of what?"

"What else? Of Quasi Braves."

"She's a Brave?!"

"But she's smaller'n me!"

"Seriously?!"

The boys' savage gazes all pointed toward Nephren at once.

Nephren was startled, and she flinched.

She was raised in the faerie warehouse, after all, where there were only women. The men closest to her were basically just the lizardfolk in the guard. It was the first time in her life having a bunch of boys of a similar race all look at her.

"Hey, let's play a game! A game!"

"What, no fair! Me first, me first!"

They roughly grabbed on to both of her arms and dragged her down the hall.

"I don't really understand, but it's like I'm surrounded by Collons."

Her murmur in the Regule Aire common language drifted further out of earshot. He was a little impressed—that was a good analogy.

"Hey, you're supposed to say thanks for your food when you're finished eating!"

Almaria's scolding echoed down the hallway. Several of the boys replied back with an energetic "Thanks for th' food!"

"Gosh, their manners are sooo bad." Almaria huffed, puffing her cheeks. "She's so small, though... Does that mean she can wield those huge swords you showed me last time, Dad?"

"Underneath it all, she's way more qualified to be a Brave than I am." After saying that much, he suddenly recalled something and continued. "... Oh yeah. And she might look small, but I think she's pretty close in age to you, Al."

"Wow, that's a surprise. I was thinking she's about Nanette's age."

Sitting at the corner of the table, Nanette, who had just turned ten, nodded in agreement.

That made sense, though. Nephren was on the small side, after all. But Willem quietly decided to himself that he would keep this conversation a secret from her.

— ...a...d... —

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, he felt like he heard a voice coming from somewhere else.

"Did someone say something just now?"

"Huh? I just said the girl looks like she's about Nanette's age."

"Yeah, not that one, after that. It sounded like a voice from far..."

"I thought she was the same age as me, too!" Nanette said, energetically waving her hand to get them to look at her. That probably was different from the voice he just heard as well.

...Well, whatever.

...It was probably just my imagination.

(Damn, this is bad. I'm starting to let my guard down.)

He couldn't stay vigilant like he thought he could. This dream was more dangerous than he imagined. Reminding himself that they were in the belly of a mysterious enemy, Willem pulled himself together.

3. The Quasi Brave Came Home

Three days passed in the blink of an eye.

Nothing particularly unusual occurred during that period. At the very least, Willem didn't see a hint of any straightforward issues, like the orphanage being suddenly struck by a bloody tragedy or the kids starting to shout hateful insults at him.

Almaria ran about the house with energy as usual.

"I'm hooome."

Welcome back! Oh gosh, you're covered in mud—let me get a towel.

"Big sis, I gotta pee!"

Okay, all right, just hold on, I'll be right there.

"I'm hungry! I want a snack!"

You just had lunch! You need to wait.

Back and forth, up and down, here and there, she ran, ran, ran.

Willem, sitting in the front yard with an iron nail between his teeth, watched her vacantly from afar.

"Well... At least she's doing all right," he murmured, swinging his hammer. There was a dull *thud*.

"What are you doing?"

He lifted his head at the voice, and Nephren was standing right beside him.

"Exactly what you think I'm doing. I'm repairing the broken fence."

"No. You were looking at Almaria. You were smiling."

"I was fondly watching over her."

"Mm-hmm."

With an expression that was hard to tell if she believed him or not, Nephren sat just behind Willem's back. She leaned on him and opened a book she must have borrowed from somewhere in the orphanage.

"Hey. I can't work like this."

"Don't move," she commanded.

What the hell? That was how he felt as he lowered the hand that held the hammer.

"...You've gotten a pretty good grasp on the language."

"I studied the surface letters with Rhan once. I already knew a little grammar and some words. So I just listen a lot. And I speak a lot."

"That's usually a big pain, though."

Willem recalled the troubles he went through to learn the island common language and smiled wryly.

And listening aside, he really wondered if Nephren was putting her "speak a lot" into practice.

"You can just use common when you talk to me, you know."

"No."

To make a point, he made his offer in island common, but she readily refused.

"The trick to learning a new language is using it as much as you can. It's possible to forget everything right away if you draw back to a familiar language."

"Man, you're earnest." He sighed. "You probably could've figured it out much faster if you just used this language comprehension talisman. It won't come off me for some reason, though."

"You can take it off, but I don't want it. Convenience is the enemy of growth."

"Man, you're *really* earnest."

Before him was the fence he was working on. In his right hand was the hammer, in his left, a nail. On his back was Nephren's warmth. His eyes wandered up to the sky, and he answered absently.

"No need to get so eager about learning it, y'know. Once we leave this world, you won't ever use the language again anyway."

"But I can use it until then, no?" Nephren said as she flipped the page. "You said we will wait until the enemy starts to play with the world and arrange it. Meaning I should have plenty of time to use it."

He had indeed said that. But at the time, he hadn't thought that they would be waiting for such a long span of time. He thought it'd be only a half a day or so.

"And there are something that bother me."

"...That bothers you?"

Her grammar was a little off, but he understood what she was getting at. He went to turn around to ask, but it seemed like she would fall over if he did, so he stayed in place.

He couldn't see Nephren's expression.

"If this is your dream, then things you don't know shouldn't be in here."

"Yeah, guess so."

He heard another page flip.

"Did you know that as of the year of the Empire...1030, of the twelve tribes that belong to the West Ga...Garma...Garmando Sands Federation, a number include survivors of the royal family?"

"Uh... Huh? What?"

It was so sudden, he found himself slightly confused.

He knew what the West Garmando Sands Federation was, of course. It represented the sandy plain that took up almost the entire western half of the arid Garmando region and the representative councils of the people who lived there. They developed a unique magic system that was very deep and intricate, especially their presence-manipulation-type spells, that all the magic schools of the entire Empire put together couldn't match.

But conversely, that was as much as Willem knew. He had no recollection of ever learning about its history or their forms of government.

"If my reading is correct, then it's here in this book."

"...Seriously?"

Just as Willem explained earlier, dreams created by talents were formed by reflecting the memories of the target. Basically, if the target didn't know something, it would never show up in that world.

"Of course, I have no idea what sort of place this West Garmando is. That means this book has information that both you and I don't know."

"*For real... Hey, ow!*" he unconsciously murmured in island common, and she pinched his butt. *Ouch.*

"No common."

"Fiiine. Anyway, uhhh... What does this mean?"

"Arrangement? From the enemy who made this world?"

That's what that would mean, huh?

But he had no idea what purpose that would serve. How would they be attacked spiritually by reading a book and gaining some knowledge they didn't know previously? Wait, was there any point in changing things in places they wouldn't even have noticed if Nephren hadn't started reading in the first place?

"...Don't worry about it for now, I guess."

Thinking any more wouldn't get them any answers. That was the conclusion he came to.

"Is that okay?"

"We shouldn't start fumbling around trying to solve mysteries with such little information. The more theories and assumptions we have, the harder it'll be for us to see the answer. Let's not read too much into anything just yet, not until we find easier hints."

"Okay."

Nephren left it at that and silently began to concentrate on her reading.

"...I can't keep working if you stay there, you know."

She readily ignored his quietly muttered complaint.



There were plenty of places within the Empire that were known for their marvelous scenery.

Like the snowflake streets in the capital's first district.

Like Negatés Grand Memorial Cathedral.

Like the hot springs of Fistirus.

Though they had been destroyed in the fires of war, the Obsidian Tower and the Twin Cemeteries and the like were all once counted among the beauties of the Empire. Bards all sung praises of the Empire as "the Land's Treasury of Art" and earned generous offerings of money from superpatriotic subjects.

But of course, it wasn't as though the entire Empire was overflowing with sophisticated beauty. No matter how much the big metropolises advanced, the countryside would always be the countryside.

In short, that's the sort of place Gomag was.

It was a bit removed from the large trade route that connected the Empire's north and south, wasn't home to any famous buildings, nor did it have any specific renowned specialty. So neither tourists nor up-and-coming merchants ever dropped by. Since it was quite far from the border, there was also no fear of war.

Every day brought the same familiar faces, the same conversations, the same routines.

Rain suddenly started to pour.

Willem and Nephren hurriedly dashed into a nearby café.

"Sheesh... That was sudden."

Willem peeked out the window and watched the torrential downpour.

The clouds of spray from the heavy rain prevented him from seeing too far, but even with the limited visibility, he could still spot a few people rushing about. Though the wind wasn't that strong, it blew the droplets sideways, so an umbrella wouldn't be much use.

"Guess we gotta kill time until it lets up... Hey, can we order?" He called for a server after glancing briefly over the menu on the clay tablet. "I'll have

a coffee, and...sure, a plate of fried potatoes. And she'll have..." He glanced at Nephren. *"You want orange juice?"*

"I will have coffee, too, and the three-jam scones, please."

She completely ignored his question in island common.

"Don't go easy on me."

"Yeah, I know."

He shrugged. Well, she didn't pinch his butt this time, so all was well.

"...I know this is obvious, but I only see featureless here."

"It was the same at the faerie warehouse, though, right?"

"Normally, I don't have the chance to see this many adults and males."

Right. Most featureless races were physically inferior, so he'd heard that not too many joined the Winged Guard. For Nephren, who usually only ever saw the residents of Island No. 68 and members of the Guard, this place was a little like a zoo.

"And? How was your harvest? Find any interesting books?"

"I don't know that until I start reading. I picked books at random regardless of genre, so I am not expecting much," Nephren replied, holding a paper bag filled with books to her chest. Just before the rain started, they had been browsing a nearby bookstore.

Unlike the past, when each individual book had to be written by hand, large-scale printing presses were the norm, and books were much easier to get. And the street the two were on now was just behind the single university in Gomag. Since plenty of students were always coming and going through here, there was a plethora of places selling books, from magnificent shops to street stalls. And of course, the types of books being sold were diverse.

He thought he could see a slight glimmer in Nephren's eyes. Though she probably wasn't entirely comfortable with the Imperial language yet, she seemed pretty happy to be able to read books she'd never heard of.

They had gone shopping to investigate the unnaturalness of this world. Basically, by comparing and contrasting books with information neither of them knew, they might be able to get a read on what the creator of this world was plotting.

But even if they couldn't achieve their main objective, the shopping trip hadn't been a total waste of time, since Nephren was happy about it. Willem thought about that as he made sure she didn't notice his wry smile.

Then he glanced around them.

The tables had been mostly full even before it started raining, but with the poor weather persisting, most of the customers were staying put. And because of that, it was rather lively in the café. Though it seemed obvious, most of the customers were university students. And among them, it felt like both he and Nephren—one who didn't look like a well-learned person and one too young to start on the path of academia to begin with—stood out somewhat.

—What would Chtholly say about this situation?

He knew. She'd probably lower her eyes and bashfully ask, "*Does it look like we're lovers on a date?*" Then he would respond, "*Nah, a brother-sister outing.*" And she would delightfully scold him with "*Don't treat me like a child!*"

He could imagine it so easily.

And the image of it tore at his chest.

"Willem?"

"It's nothing."

The painful feelings must have made themselves known on his face. As Nephren peered at him worryingly with her usual expression, he looked away from her, brushing it off.

"Did you find anything strange?"

"Hmm? ...Oh, that."

This world was a dream—a little pocket garden that imitated a person's memories, arbitrarily arranged by the world's creator. The problem they were facing was beyond that, though.

"I dunno. I don't even know whose memories this world is based off."

The scenery was all very familiar to Willem. That's why he thought this was his own dream at first. But it couldn't involve anything he didn't know if that were the case.

He looked around him, taking in the wintertime Gomag.

The shades of moss on the cobblestones. The small cracks in the brick walls. The graffiti on the plaster.

"—Whoever's dream this is, they know Gomag way better than I do, read way more books, and know the orphanage just as well as I do. I can't even imagine who it might be."

"Mm."

"We were the only ones there on the surface, so I really doubt anyone else ended up victims along with us. I can't tell what's happening at all as of now."

"Mm-hmm."

Nephren's noncommittal response didn't sound particularly upset.

"'Mm-hmm'...? You've been pretty unresponsive."

"I'm not that interested."

So this was just a matter of interest for her? Even though they wouldn't be able to get back to the real world if they didn't solve this problem?

"This world isn't so terrible. I want to stay a little longer."

"This is a fake world, filled with fake emnetwiht. Nothing's real here. We could stay forever, and it'd all be empty."

"Willem, are you really saying that to me?"

He faltered.

Leprechauns were the embodiment of false life. They impersonated emnetwiht in order to trick the Carillon. There was nothing real about them.

Though there was nothing real about them, they still existed.

Indeed. Second Officer Willem Kmetsch could never ignore that fact. He wanted to cherish them and gave up on being responsible for them in name only. Which meant—

“Almaria and everyone are here. I am here, too.”

All the characters in this dream were false life.

They were imaginary beings, impersonating people who existed in the real world in order to fool the ones ensnared in it.

There was nothing different from the faeries at the warehouse.

“The other world and this world. You can pick your favorite, Willem.”

“...Damn it,” he muttered quietly to himself so she couldn’t hear. “You’re pretty mean for someone who’ll coddle me at the drop of a hat.”

The rain wasn’t letting up.

When the coffee they ordered came, Nephren took out a book from among her stash and immediately engrossed herself in reading. Willem, who didn’t have a good method for passing the time, let his gaze wander outside the window and immersed himself in the sound of the raindrops.

He never used to handle boredom well.

Or rather, he could never stand wasting time.

That was because Willem had a goal. And it was much too ambitious, something he could never reach with a sane amount of effort. So he put in an insane amount of effort. He spent every single moment of free time bettering himself.

In the end, his ludicrous efforts led to half-baked results that seemed to bear fruit but at the same time didn’t. He learned countless sword techniques, countless martial techniques, countless skills related to the battlefield, and he became quite strong. His vast store of knowledge and experience directly correlated to reliability in battle. Several of his companions described his way of fighting as “doing everything a person possibly can,” and he also felt like he’d truly reached a stage very close to that.

But still.

Willem’s goal was to become a Legal Brave.

That was, in essence, to “accomplish the impossible.” No matter how infinitely close Willem got to the peak of emnetwiht ability, he would never reach a point that allowed him to go beyond what mortals were capable of.

There was no point in any of his training or studies.

At least, no matter how much he trained or studied, he would never reach his goal.

Even after learning and accepting this, Willem still couldn’t stop training and tempering himself. He wasn’t exactly sure why, either. It might’ve been for backward reasons—that he didn’t want to have put all he’d done to waste.

Of course, he wondered if all his effort really was for nothing. If he’d just given up on a dream that would never come true and used his time like a normal teenage boy would, he might’ve lived a more accommodating life.

He might've even learned how to treat girls better.

...He could've made the girl who told him she loved him happy.

"Willem?!"

A man's voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

Willem turned around, and a silver-haired young man was beaming brightly at him. He looked like he had just dashed in from the rain, as he was soaked from head to toe.

"It is you, Willem. It's been ages! When'd you come back to Gomag?"

Nephren, who'd just started reading one of her new books, lifted her gaze slightly, as though to ask if she knew him. "Yeah," Willem responded lightly. It was true he knew the man, at least.

"...Just the other day."

"Oh, that's a girl I haven't seen before. A new member of the orphanage?"

"Yeah, guess you could say that."

The young man approached the table uninvited and sat down without permission. He smiled to the reading girl.

"Hello. I'm Theodore Brickroad, an old friend of Willem's here. All my good friends call me Ted, though, so you should remember me by that."

Nephren's gaze didn't even leave the page she was on. She totally ignored him.

Willem thought he saw a few beads of sweat appear on Ted's forehead.

"You look well, Ted."

"Oh yes, I'm doing great! My level's gone up a lot, too!"

"Level..." He thought for a moment. "Oh yeah. You're an Adventurer now, right?"

What were Adventurers?

The word originally referred to people who put themselves in danger as a trade.

Danger and *adventure* were synonymous, and to adventure for a living meant to be in danger for a living. They cast themselves into battle against monstrous races, trekked to investigate mazes, and risked their lives to subdue dragons.

They heedlessly thrust themselves into danger that no normal person could touch, in pursuit of harvesting the vast sums of money on offer *because* of the danger.

"You haven't heard?!"

"Well, it's my first time back in Gomag in a while, and I don't really care what you're up to."

"Even if you're lying, please act like you know! Honesty might be a virtue, but it's not as if virtuous people live forever!"

Ha-ha-ha, he sure is pushing it.

"And? What's your level now?"

Levels were numbers roughly assigned to indicate an individual's degree of training and fighting abilities, mostly used among the Adventurers. The

higher the number, the more mature they were in battle, and the lower the number, the more inexperienced.

Regular civilians who had never seen a battle were around level 2 or 3. An experienced soldier was about 10, give or take. For someone who spends their entire life on the battlefield and dies on it, the number reached would be just below 30. Thereabouts was the typical upper limits attainable by mankind. To pass that threshold would be to step outside the standard emnetwiht framework.

"Eight."

Well. That was pretty average for a common adventurer. No, that was probably closer to the upper ends when taking his age into account. It was something he could say with pride.

"...Oh yeah, I heard your level is insanely high, Willem, that it's way beyond the typical thirty wall and stuff like that."

"Oh, uh... Guess so."

Willem wasn't an Adventurer, of course. But he often fought alongside them, so he'd had his level measured a few times.

The last time he had it done, he was told it was 69.

Everyone there with him had been more exasperated by the absurdity of it all than shocked.

"That's incredible. Oh, then do you train using secret methods passed down from the Church to only Braves?"

"No, not really." He sipped his coffee lightly. "And they're just numbers anyway. You really want to hear them that badly?"

Levels were one way to measure strength. In other words, it was nothing *but* a way to measure strength.

There were plenty of people who had low numbers but were incredibly useful in real battle, and even more troublingly, there were far more where the opposite was true. For Willem, levels weren't something that anyone should really pay much mind.

"Of course I do. For us Adventurers, the number of our level is the number of our earnings. You can't gain any information about monsters with a great reward without a high enough level."

That made sense. So that's how the Guild prevented meaningless deaths of its members. It was strange that there were Adventurers who weren't allowed near danger, though.

"Well, if you just want to bump your number up, then that's not too hard. It'll go up on its own if you just force your way through tough situations."

"They're called tough situations *because* they're hard, you know."

What a cheeky thing to say back to me.

"...It's not exactly a trick, but I do know a way that'll shoot your numbers right up."

"Really?!"

Ted leaned forward.

"The closest one to here is... Yeah, so there's a master swordsman somewhere west of the Ceramic City of Alvarie who recruits students from all over, so go there and ask to take part in the trial of the ultimate secret technique."

"A finishing move right off the bat, is it? Sounds like some sort of cheating."

"Once you start the trial, you either master the technique and come home, or you die. They announce that it's either one or the other."

"...Die?" There was a hint of doubt in Ted's voice.

"The technique's a compound skill that mixes psychic skills and physical ones. It was a move that could kill your opponent by ripping their guts to shreds even through armor. People with the sense for it first get a grasp on it after they've been cornered, right when they're moments away from death. People without it die without ever being able to do anything."

"...Er?" A tinge of unease crept into his voice.

"That's why the trial itself throws you straight into battle with a sub-dragon to defeat it."

"That would kill me. That would kill me in a second."

"Oh, and yeah, even though it's a sub-class of dragons, it's still a dragon. It's superstrong, its scales are tough, and the weapons regular people use barely put a scratch on it. What you're supposed to do to survive is somehow open your eyes to the final technique and knock the thing out. But I never could."

"...What?" Ted's eyes widened. "Oh, did you use some kind of trick, then?"

"Guess you could call it that. Since I couldn't use the technique, I just beat it physically, head-on."

".....I'm sorry?"

"Like I said, weapons regular people use hardly affect it. But that doesn't mean they can't hurt it at all. I used skills I'd learned before here and there, trying to find something that might be a little more effective, but after about a week, the dragon just collapsed on its own after taking a bunch of chip damage."

".....Oh."

"It doesn't matter what it is—if you force your way through tough situations, your level will go up. I think it went up, like, ten or so for me at the time. That master guy had no idea what to make of it."

"...Of course he wouldn't."

Ted sounded tired for some reason.

And afterward, when his master and Lillia heard the story, they burst out laughing. They pointed at him and said, "*Guys without the sense really have it tough, huh?*" A real rude bunch, those two.

"If you can plow through every predicament you can land yourself in, then the number of your nominal level and the number of training houses you're banned from will just keep going up. You could use spells and stuff

instead, but it's hard to get a reaction from that, since anyone can use a spell if they learn it. If you can safely endure all that, then your level will go up two or three times, easy." He grinned. "I'll write as many introduction letters as you want if you wanna give it a shot."

"No, I'm sorry, but I'll have to pass. I'd prefer to live a steady life."

Hey, man, you're the one who chose to work as an Adventurer!

"And what are you gonna do after steadily raising your level?" The question suddenly came to him.

"Well, you know." Ted's face flushed for some reason, and he scratched his cheek. "I need to grow up to be independent, otherwise, I won't be able to go and ask for Allie's hand in marriage."

"All righty, then. I'll go ahead and tell you about a test that'll put your level right up to 50, so get your last will and testament ready."

"I'm sorry! I won't do it! I promise! Please don't do this!"

He deftly moved the legs of the chair with a loud clatter and pulled away from Willem.

"Please stop," the server scolded. Maybe he should just—

Bzzt.

There was a sharp sensation on the back of his neck.

"...Willem?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I'll be back."

He stood, rubbing the nape of his neck with his palm.

Nephren wordlessly looked up.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah. Gonna see someone else I haven't seen in a while... Ted, sorry, but keep an eye on her. Take her back to the orphanage for me."

That was all Willem said before he left.

"Huh? Uh, er, Willem?"

Willem ignored the bewildered voice behind him.

The rain continued to fall, but right now, he couldn't let that bother him.



—Suddenly, he remembered something from the past.

It happened a little over 527 years ago.

Several days earlier, it had been decided that seven warriors, with Lillia in the lead, would head to battle the Visitor Elq Hrqstn.

"I'm not a huge fan of big swords, you know," Lillia said.

At the most, the blade should be about as long as her arm. It should be light enough for her to swing it around with one hand. Basically, she preferred longswords meant for fighting against other people. She could pour all the lessons she learned from her parents, her old teacher, her master (the latter two were apparently different) into that kind of weapon.

The Carillon were great swords meant for killing things that were beings far beyond the emnetwiht. They were platform shoes meant to forcefully

boost the weak emnetwiht race to reach heights they couldn't normally, even using all their natural strength. That's why she didn't like them very much.

He understood what she wanted to say.

He understood, but he didn't think that was something the Legal Brave herself should say as the one who was chosen to be the current wielder of the most ancient holy blade Seniorious.

There were so many people in the world who wished to be chosen by a powerful Carillon but weren't, who longed to wield great power but couldn't. For someone who had all that to make light of her own power was the same as making enemies of all those people. She would be stabbed one day if she declared that publicly. Actually, he wanted to stab her. She'd better watch her step.

"...So you challenged her to a practice match and got beaten to a pulp."

Willem responded with a low groan to Navrutri's tired statement.

From Shimmering Rod to Bear's Paw; from the Fox's Tail to Needle Jab; from Nightingale Sweep to Capricious Drum—all the techniques he so humbly learned from Hilgram were easily seen through and countered by the chosen Brave's superior ability, Insight (which apparently had some exaggerated name like Eyes of the Abyss). Willem had even tried throwing in a Haze Step and a North-Star Track that he learned from Navrutri, but there it was pointless.

The wall of talent and skill that separated him from a Legal Brave was impossibly tall and thick.

"You've got the whole wrong idea, Will," Navrutri said, acting with an exaggerated sigh. "We men could never win against women in the first place. Try as we may, we'll never be any match. All we can do is beg for their love."

"I was an idiot to ask for real advice from you," Willem moaned.

"No, this is a real and serious talk. I guess you could call this a talk about the difference in sword quality." Navrutri waved his finger lightly, as though tracing the glint of the blade. "Your sword is what we would call a blade for battle. You wield it to chip away at your enemy's strength, deal them a great amount of damage, and destroy them. In extreme terms, it divides everything before it into two categories: things that can be killed and things that can't, doing things in a way that rejects any other information."

"So it's no good?"

"I'd say it's standard for a fighter. No one's gonna find fault with that." He shrugged. "But it's not like you want to either deny Lil or make her surrender. Your sword isn't meant to be wielded against an opponent like that at all."

"...Well, I'd wanna make her surrender to me at least once in my life if I could."

"That's one dream that could never come true for men. I'm rooting for you, though. From a safe distance behind the scenes," he said profoundly.

"So if my sword's meant for fighting, then what the hell's Lillia's for?"

"Hmm. Her sword is just like Mr. Nils's. Either her honest nature makes them look similar, or maybe their personalities are just very similar."

Nils D. Foreigner. He was Lillia's master, the man who was also Willem's "damn teacher."

"It's a greedy style of swordsmanship that's characteristic of someone hesitant... Of someone who desperately, desperately doesn't want to hurt anyone but has no choice but to—the typical blade of a coward."



Willem came to a place between two roads and stopped.

Before he knew it, a silver blade pushed against the back of his neck. Red blood oozed out faintly, was quickly washed away by the rain, and disappeared.

"Yo," Willem casually called out to the person behind him. "Inviting me out here intending to kill me is pretty old-fashioned, don'cha think? It's not like you're a stranger or anything. Can't you just use your words if you need something?"

"...It's because things might get a little too complicated for other people to hear."

Before he knew it, a man in a waterproof robe stood behind Willem.

He responded with a dry voice.

"There are things I want to ask you before we rekindle our friendship. I'd be happy if you answered me honestly, Will."

"If that's all you want, then come at me from the front. You know I'm shit at hiding things, right?"

"First question." He totally ignored his banter. "Why are you here?"

"...That's a weird question. You know Gomag's my hometown, right? Now that I've said that, it's way weirder to see you here."

"It sounds like the meaning of my question didn't get through to you."

The knife pressed ever so slightly harder on his neck.

"Why have *you*, who should've died with Ebon Candle the day of the battle, suddenly appeared in this town now?"

"...What?"

For a moment, Willem couldn't understand what he'd been asked. Then, the second after he understood the man's words, he realized his mistake.

Up until that very moment, he'd forgotten to think about something very important.

This was a dreamworld. Keeping that premise in mind, he hadn't checked to see when "now" was for this world.

(I just assumed that any sense of time in the dreamworld was decided haphazardly...)

Willem understood several things immediately from this brief exchange.

The first was that this world was set after their team had gone off to battle the Visitors...and, somehow, before it was destroyed by the Seventeen Beasts.

Next was the fact that the Willem Kmetsch of this world apparently never came home—he had probably been turned to stone on the battlefield.

And lastly, it was becoming more and more certain that this world wasn't simply based off Willem's memories. There was information written in books that he didn't personally know, and the people in this dream were experiencing a time that Willem never did.

(What on earth is going on...?)

The time he spent thinking about that was probably nothing more than a few seconds. The man behind him must've taken the pause as some sort of answer, as he withdrew the blade from Willem's neck.

"...You sure you can let me go? I haven't answered you yet."

"I wasn't considering this a threat in the first place. The person who decides to use this toy of a blade against the strongest Quasi Brave would be pretty incompetent."

"Strongest, huh?" Willem smiled wryly. "You're making me uncomfortable calling me that, Navrutri."

Slowly, he turned around.

The man pulled back his waterproof hood, revealing red hair like burning flames and the unshaven face of a man of about thirty.

Navrutri Teigozak.

He was one of the Quasi Braves recognized by the Church of Exalted Light, hailing from a tribe in West Garmando. His weapon of choice was a curved blade traditional to the tribes, but when he stood before the strongest of enemies, he unsheathed his pure and beloved Carillon, Lapidemsibilus.

"Don't flatter me too much. We're both still Quasi Braves, but you're my senior and more skilled than I am. You can even wield higher-ranked Carillon than I can."

Navrutri smiled slightly at the praise.

"The scary part about you is that you don't say it out of humility or self-effacement but because you mean it."

Willem also smiled slightly in return.

"You're a nuisance because you don't say that out of flattery or ridicule but because you mean it."

A brief silence. Only the violent sound of the rain hitting the cobblestones filled the space around them.

"...I know I should've died alongside that black skull. I don't remember anything after that. By the time I realized it, I was in Gomag. That was in the morning, three days ago."

Willem answered the original question.

If he talked about everything honestly, then he would have to go as far as to convince Navrutri that the world itself was a fake. He decided that was much too difficult, so he lied and hid anything he didn't think they could discuss.

"I want to know what happened. And that's not all." Willem hurriedly ran his fingers through his soaked hair. "What happened in the battle, in the end? I see people haven't been annihilated yet, so we must've beat the Visitors, and now I know you made it back alive. But what about the others?"

Navrutri didn't answer.

"And more importantly, why are you threatening a friend of yours with malice and knives and stuff? Explain to me what on *earth* is going on."

"The True World."

He heard the man quietly murmur the phrase.

It was the name of an organization, one that sounded a little too over-the-top, like it was meant to embarrass the listener.

"You remember, right? They were up to something, trying to overthrow the Imperial Capital. Their remnants are trying to carry on with their previous plans."

—*Oh, right.*

So that's why the phrase would turn up.

Now that he thought about it, it was obvious. This was a dream that was a copy of the surface from the past, and since the defeat of the Visitors had already happened, then the next event to occur was none other than the appearance of the Seventeen Beasts. Then, a few days after that, towns would be swallowed up, countries demolished, and the emnetwiht race itself would disappear from the earth.

Then it made sense that the True World, the ones who birthed the Beasts, were now engaged in some secret activities.

This was a world that would soon end by their hand.

(I kinda feel like a prophet.)

It felt strange knowing the established future. His feelings of omnipotence and helplessness swirled together in a ruddy, marbled pattern. Between pleasure and unpleasantness, his mood leaned much further toward the latter.

Willem hid his unease beneath his serious look and asked, "So how is this and that related?"

"There are Braves and ex-Braves in secret communications with the True World."

—"What?"

That was something he certainly didn't know. He hadn't even imagined that ever happening.

"You're kidding— Wait, you wouldn't be on the move if this was unconfirmed information. This is serious. And since you're not hiding it, that means you decided it's okay that the Quasi Braves start doubting one

another. So you're prioritizing putting everyone on guard and blunting their movements rather than trying to identify the true identity of the rebels."

"Insightful as always," Navrutri said wryly. "You'd be much more popular with the ladies if you used that insight to understand their hearts."

Oh, shut up.

Willem never really felt desire to be popular whenever Navrutri, who bragged he had as many lovers as ports in the world, said things like that, but he also really hated how convincing it sounded coming from him.

"Judging by your response, I'm going to say that your relationship with the True World is more in the clear." Navrutri spread out both his hands, and the knife he had been gripping in his right had already disappeared, like a magic trick. "But still, it's not like we talked openly about everything. You said you don't remember anything until this morning—and I don't think I can just accept that at face value."

...This guy is keen, as always.

And not only that, he was definitely using that keen insight with women's hearts. Willem was jealous. Boy, was he jealous.

"Okay, Will. I'll withhold my doubts about you for now. I'll at least deal with you on the assumption that you're not guilty. Try not to do anything to stand out until things've calmed down some," Navrutri stated arbitrarily, turning his back to him.

"You don't need me to help?"

"My job right now is to doubt my companions. I can't trust my back to those I can't say for sure are totally innocent," he said, his back turned carelessly to Willem. The way he said it was clunky and hard to understand, either because he didn't word it well or he just had a roundabout way of saying it. "...And I'll answer just one more thing for you. Out of all of us who fought against the Visitors that day, the only ones who survived were Lillia and me. It's only just now that you've been added to that list."

"I...see..."

The outcome was exactly what he'd heard from the Great Sage, Suowong. And so, while he wasn't surprised, hearing it again put him in low spirits.

"The only ones we recovered bodies for were Suowong and Emissa. Suowong's body had some complicated thaumaturgy cast on it or something, so he hasn't been able to have a funeral. He's resting in the basement chapel of the Church."

Hey, what're you doing, Great Sage? Now's not nap time. Maybe the thaumaturgy he'd concocted for his resurrection or revival or whatever wasn't starting up right.

"That's all I can tell you. We'll continue our chat over a drink after everything's over," Navrutri said lightly, beginning to walk off.

"Hey, Navrutri?" The words spilled from Willem's mouth. "You've been, uh... You been okay?"

His receding figure stopped briefly.

"Fortunately, thanks."

Navrutri answered without turning back and disappeared into the misty rain.

Rain continued to fall.

Willem looked up to the sky.

Though this world was supposed to be nothing more than a dream, the drops on his skin felt terribly cold.

His loud sneeze echoed throughout the street.

4. The Girl with Crimson Hair

A large painting hung on the wall of a small church.

It depicted a barren wasteland with the earth exposed. About ten men and women, their faces obscured, stood huddled close together upon it.

"—The Gods arrived from a distant sea of stars and stood on the wastes."

The girl was looking up at the painting.

Her hair was a bright crimson, like an energetically dancing flame. She had the height and build of a child in her mid-teens. But her face as she gazed up at the painting was cherubic, like a baby.

"They felt pity for the land and how barren it was, so they divided their own souls into tiny shards and granted them to the Beasts who crept about the land. The Beasts, now with a fragment of soul within them, gained intelligence and began to walk the earth on two legs. That was the beginning of what would become people—"

One of the elderly priests in charge of this church finished his story and stood beside the girl.

"—You are quite enthralled by it, aren't you, young lady? I imagine you're interested in the legend of the Visitors?"

"Yeah." The girl nodded slightly. "Because I never met my parents before."

The priest murmured in quiet admiration. The Church's teaching that the Visitors were the ones who created the emnetwiht race wasn't widely accepted. *So someone so faithful as to call the Visitors her parents is rather unusual*, he thought.

"There's no need to despair. Our emnetwiht souls were originally given to us by the Gods. As long as we are here, the souls of our distant ancestors, the Visitors, will always be with us."

"I don't think that's possible." The girl's hair wavered slightly, and she smiled sadly. "The souls given by the Visitors were finite. And yet, people multiplied far too much. The fragments were stretched infinitely thin and started to lose their meaning. Am I wrong?"

The priest furrowed his brow. What the girl said mentioned lines of thought that rejected the Church's teachings. He felt like he should reprimand her for that, but there was something else that bothered him...

"Why are you using past tense?"

"Though this may be the present for you, for me, this is the distant past."

She wasn't joking. She wasn't playing dumb. Her expression was characteristic of someone who had given up everything—completely transparent and empty. It didn't suit the young girl's face at all.

"Who are...?"

Just as he was about to ask who she was, the girl suddenly made a sound of surprise and looked up.

"I'm sorry—I have to go now. *Car*my is calling me."

She spun around on her heel. The hems of her traveling clothes swayed lightly.

"Good-bye, sir. I really like that picture."

"P-please wait...a..."

The priest thought he heard a faint footstep, and the girl vanished before his eyes.

He slowly pulled back the hand that had reached for the girl's shoulder, and he stared into his palm.

"...Hmm...?"

His memory quickly clouded over.

Someone was definitely here just now. He talked with them. He was certain that happened, but he could barely remember what they looked like, their voice, or what they talked about. It felt like he'd been tricked by a faerie on a terribly misty night.

"What was—?"

He murmured his question, but no one was there to answer him.

He turned his gaze to the painting hanging on the wall. The images of the Visitors trapped in the canvas, of course, would say nothing to him... But for a brief moment, the priest thought he saw clearly sad smiles on their obscured faces.



What Cannot Be Taken Back

-eggs had a great fall-

What Cannot Be Taken Back

-eggs had a great fall-

1. The Seven of the Past

They probably planned everything out very carefully.

They probably invested a lot of time and money in elaborate preparations.

They had a horde of monsters with equipment enhanced by concept-manipulation magic, battle puppets created with a liberal use of illegal heavy metals, and cockatrices forced under their control via charm enchantments.

Each individual part was equally as powerful as a single army—no, perhaps even more powerful. Their military strength could be described only as overpowering, strong enough to topple a small country.

The ones in charge of the whole thing were probably certain of their victory when they set their plan in motion.

That was several years ago.

Willem Kmetsch was fourteen at the time. In his experience, that was four years ago; in terms of the real world, it was 529 years ago; and by the flow of time in this dreamworld, a mere two years ago.

Indeed—here, it was just a mere two years ago.



He swung his sword. He swung it again and again.

He grew tired of counting the enemies he felled after about twenty. So he eventually cleared his mind, concentrating on nothing but cutting down any enemy who appeared before him.

But the big trouble were the monsters strengthened by spells.

Concept manipulation magic was a type of enchantment that overwrote the very essence of the target it was cast on. Spells that often appeared in children's tales—turning people into stone or transforming a little bird into a cute girl—were that sort of magic. They gave muscular capabilities to creatures that didn't originally have them and modified their bone structure to incorporate weapons.

That being said, that didn't mean they were formidable enemies. It was just that as he cut into enemies who housed dense and high-level

enchancements, his Carillon, which also incorporated high-level enhancements, would start acting up.

It was not much more than a nuisance, so he was planning on ignoring it and pushing through by force until the end. But there were more enemies around him than he had first thought. If he kept fighting with his sword's lowered capabilities, then it was possible he'd end up with more problems on his hands because he was lazy and got his priorities backward.

Oh well.

With Haze Step, he put distance between himself and the horde of enemies and poured magic into the Carillon in his right hand.

"Initialize adjustment!"

A Carillon was a weapon fashioned from fragments of metal called talismans, bound together by magic. He would typically undo the binding force that was the veins of enchantment when he began adjustment. The sword would lose its sword shape and turn into twenty-nine pieces of metal. And those twenty-nine pieces would scatter in the air around him, in a state ready to receive precise adjustments.

But on the battlefield, there wasn't any time for such careful and leisurely activities. Willem didn't undo the veins but instead just loosened them. The fragments were free but remained in the shape of a sword. They separated just wide enough for a couple of fingers to fit in between and stay in place.

A steel puppet soldier came up right behind him, and he split it in two with the Carillon in his left hand. At the same time, he slipped his right thumb between the metal fragments and pressed the crystal hiding inside. By making contact with it, he could read the Carillon's status.

...Bleh.

There was a large venenum blockage in the spinal root. The venenum he'd just activated wasn't circulating throughout the blade. Now he understood why it hadn't been working so well. For now, he would do emergency repairs to get through this ordeal so he could do a full maintenance pass later. He rearranged the talismans through his thumb, creating an impromptu bypass for the venenum to circulate. He finished the adjustments and returned the veins of enchantment back to normal.

There were many different types of Carillon, but this was the reason why Willem liked using these mass-produced Percivals. They were of a simple make and were receptive to strain and practicalities during adjustment. There was no other Carillon whose slayer levels and resistances could be allocated mid-battle. And incidentally, since they were comparatively smaller blades, Willem rated them highly, since he was only fourteen and wasn't completely grown yet. If he pushed himself a little, he could actually dual-wield them, like he was doing now.

Regardless, his fellow Quasi Braves often sighed and said, "*You shouldn't be able to adjust your sword on your own in the first place*" and

would never agree with him no matter how he sang the praises of the Percival series.

Anyway. The Percival in his right hand was in good shape for the time being, and he sensed that his Dindrane would start to wear out soon. He just needed to be a little careful as he fought from now on, so he gathered himself and—

—he leaped backward with all his might.

A brilliant flash burned his eyes.

There was a deafening roar that could be described only as a shock rather than a sound.

The intense blast felt like it would rip his whole body to shreds.

“—Rgh—”

He ignited his venenum and concentrated his power in his legs. Since his five senses were unreliable, he relied on his sense of balance to search for the direction of the ground and landed as though ready to kick.

“Ngh, gah...”

His senses slowly returned as he stayed a few moments in that position, groaning.

His lungs, crushed by the impact, started working again.

Ignoring the slight pain in his throat, he inhaled two lungfuls of air, and

—

“EMISSAAAAA!! Are you trying to kill me?!” he yelled.

“Oh? So that’s where you were.”

A little ways away from him, a lone woman landed gently on the ground.

He’d heard she was twenty. She wore a long, frilly skirt that was inappropriate for battle. Her outfit looked like it would get mud all over it just with a little jogging around, but he could scarcely spot any dirt on it.

Emissa Hodwin. Adventurer. Her registered level was 61, apparently the second highest of all current adventurers.

“It’s not the time to do this all nice and compact, is it? We were supposed to blast them away all at once, no?”

“I’m complaining because I was just about to be blasted away with the rest of them!”

“What, you’re just fine after everything’s been said and done, and our enemies have all been neatly put away, so there’s no problem, is there?”

“Yeah, but that’s something only *I* can say!!”

As he yelled, he looked at the battleground—or what was the battleground.

The spot he had been running around only moments ago, where he’d fought with two Carillon at his beck and call, was now nothing but a concave hole.

He could no longer see any enemies nearby.

That was caused by an impossibly large-scale venenum explosion. It was way beyond the limits of how much venenum a person could typically activate on their own, but a naturally peculiar physique and outstanding

talent, coupled with original control theories, could apparently make such destructive power a reality.

He'd swung and swung and swung his sword and stopped counting at around twenty, but he figured he'd killed about fifty or sixty enemies. But just in that moment, the number of enemies Emissa had blasted away easily surpassed what Willem had racked up.

"...And you blew 'em all away, huh?"

"Yeah, that's what I've been telling you!"

Willem plopped down onto the ground, where the views were now oddly clear. He looked around. Before the battle began, this was the base of a mountain, decorated with precipitous and beautiful curves and a forest of evergreen trees, though somewhat sparse. But now that he was looking around again, the mountain curves were battered, and rocky skin peeked out from what was once a forest.

"We've destroyed too much nature."

"What? Let me just say that this isn't entirely my fault, okay? Hilgram was supposed to be in charge of the mountain over there and those rivers that way, you know."

"...Huh."

Hilgram Moto. Adventurer. Level 58.

He didn't use weapons. He didn't use venenum. He chose to stand on the front lines completely unarmed—a certified eccentric with excellence as his only weapon.

Willem looked to where Emissa was pointing. A great boulder had crumbled like sand, and there were countless tiny creeks in a spot where a waterfall used to be.

"All of that with his bare hands, huh? Just looking at that makes me lose confidence as a venenum user."

Yeah, I get it, but hearing you say that pisses me off.

"All right. Can you see how many enemies there are left?"

"Uh... There's a few left in Kaya's forest, and... Oh, there's one whole group left over there."

Emissa followed Willem's gaze, then cried out in astonishment, "What is that? That's an ivy dryad, right? It's really big, though."

"That thing's very ecology's probably been altered, like always."

"Huh... Creepy."

Concept manipulation spells came with incredibly great cost. That thing was probably their opponent's last and greatest trump card.

And she brushed that aside with a simple "*Creepy*." A pity.

"So who's gonna take care of that? I'm not doing it. I'm staying far away from that thing."

The second after Emissa spoke so selfishly, an enormous ball of light floated up into the sky.

"...Oh, I guess Suowong is."

As she gazed blankly up at the sky, she pulled out earplugs from her bag.

An invisible paintbrush scattered the light, weaving a delicate lace pattern on the blue sky.

"It's another big one today."

"Casting more thaumaturgy on an opponent who's already cursed isn't really effective. He's probably gonna hit it hard because he wants to clean this up by force."

Thaumaturgic seals, as the name suggested, were emblems used as catalysts when inscribing thaumaturgy. Higher-level thaumaturgy required large and complicated seals to match.

Of course, there was no time to construct every detail of something like that on the battlefield. Most thaumaturgists opted to carve their seals onto parchment or clay tablets ahead of time and use them depending on the situation.

Suowong Kandel wasn't *most thaumaturgists*.

He could fabricate thaumaturgic spells that carved out the seals he needed at the time, on the spot. So no matter how complicated or special it was, he could create and use whatever he wanted when he wanted it.

Even Willem, who had no drawing sense and couldn't even carve out the most basic thaumaturgy, could clearly tell it was one big sham. How awful Suowong's fellow thaumaturgists in society must've felt...

As he sat thinking about all that, the thaumaturgic seal in the sky completed.

Both Willem and Emissa put in their earplugs at the same time, turned their backs to the seal, and closed their eyes.

Five seconds later.

The two opened their eyes and turned back around, and the mountain that was just there had been chipped away and was now one size smaller.

"Too much destruction of nature."

I totally agree with you, but hearing you say it really pisses me off.



"Hey, kid, good work today!"

Kaya Kaltran came and embraced Willem as she voiced her appreciation.

"Hey— Stop, ouch, that hurts and you're dirty that hurts you're so dirty!!"

Kaya, unlike Emissa and Hilgram and those weirdos, was a proper and respectable Adventurer. Level 39. She wore well-forged armor to protect herself and struck her enemies with swings of her master-crafted sword.

A regular person's spine would snap in an instant if given a hug with all the strength from such a seasoned veteran. Additionally, post-battle Kaya still wore her armor, soiled with the backslash of blood from the monsters.

"Sorry, sorry. You're such a cute kid— I just have to, y'know?"

"Don't strangle me in a way that forces me to use all my venenum to protect myself just because you *have* to, okay?!"

"Awww. I got to, since you *can* use all your venenum to protect yourself. If I did that to any other kid, I'd wake up the next day with a bounty on my head."

Is this chick really saying that with a smile on her face?

"This is the only time you're ever going to be this cute! You're a growing boy, so either next year or the year after, your limbs'll get bigger, and you'll grow up to be a great young man. What a waste it'd be if I didn't enjoy it now!"

Oh, okay. Hope I grow up fast, then.

"So it would be your son's turn next, right? He's about three, was it?"

Lillia joined the conversation, poking her head in from the side.

"Yeah, you're right. I want to start training him as soon as possible. My husband doesn't agree with putting a sword in his hands, though."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"He's saying things like: I won't let him take up dangerous work like Adventuring, I can't stand to lose in strength to both my wife and my son, and on and on. What a pain he is!"

You're the pain. Good luck, husband guy. I'm secretly rooting for you.

"You were just secretly rooting for her husband, weren't you, Will?"

Navrutri read his mind.

"You're not supposed to say anything, even if you notice... Sheesh, my clothes are nasty."

His clothes were already muddied from his own battle and Emissa's explosion, but now they were covered in blood as well thanks to Kaya's armor pressing against him. There was no questioning if he walked around like this at night, he would immediately be chased by the guard.

"They sure are dirty. Didn't you use Haze Step? I thought I taught you how before?"

"You sure did, and I sure did. But they're like this anyway," Willem responded sourly.

That was one of the curved-blade techniques handed down in Navrutri's homeland. By basic logic, it was a feint move that used fluctuations in the user's movement speed, but anyone who mastered it could turn their own body into haze and slip through all sorts of attacks and whatnot.

"You can even avoid dust once you get a little used to it."

Even if I wait my whole life, I'm never going to get that used to it.

"Ooh, I did! See, my clothes are nice and neat."

Shut up, Lillia. Your talent is the enemy of the common folk.

"Come on—tell her she looks nice and neat. You can't be stingy with stuff like that."

"He's right; he's right! Be honest and say it to me!"

Shut up, both of you.

Just a little ways away from them, he noticed one small boy sitting by the corpse of a monster.

The hem of his baggy white cloak was dirtied with mud and blood, but he didn't seem to notice.

"...What are you doing?" Willem approached him and asked.

Suowong Kandel, a genius thaumaturgist at the tender age of twelve, responded without lifting his head.

"I checked into the structure of its enchantment. Something wasn't right during the fight."

"What about it?"

Prompted by Suowong's words, Willem kindled a bit of venenum and activated his Sight.

Complicated magic was stretched out over the monster's entire body. Willem, who wasn't very well versed in all this, was unsure how it was all connected or what sort of enchantment it formed.

"Is something weird about it?"

"The patterns are all the same." Suowong lifted his head to look at Willem. "Curses like these are usually custom-made. They have to be created specifically for each subject, otherwise, they won't be as effective. That's why they're costly and not suited for mass production. But it seems like this enchantment somehow solved that problem."

"...Enchantments with the same pattern that can be cast on just about anyone?! Isn't something that ridiculous Seniorious's specialty?!"

"No, it doesn't seem like it's as simple and direct as Seniorious. They must still be researching, because the only enchantments with pattern changes are simple and light ones. Like ones that give them horns, or increase muscle mass, or change the number or location of internal organs..."

"Still researching? Doesn't that mean things're gonna get pretty bad in the future?"

"It does. We need to carefully shut down the organization that made these things as soon as possible, otherwise, things don't bode well for the days to come."

Willem pressed his temples and fished around in his memories. He tried to remember that name he'd forgotten.

It was something like True... Verity... Something, something, Earth...?

"The True World."

That was it.

"That's an awful name. It's too generic to remember, and it sounds so edgy and embarrassing."

"You think so? I think whoever came up with it has great taste."

Oh, right, you're the one with the "great" taste. Please don't ever start calling yourself by that nickname you came up with for yourself because all it does is cause secondhand embarrassment.



Willem Kmetsch was fourteen at the time. So in Willem's experience, it was four years ago; in terms of the real world, it was 529 years ago; and by the flow of time in this dreamworld, a mere two years ago.

Indeed—it had been only two years since then—

2. What Must Be Protected

He didn't know exactly what day it was, but the Seventeen Beasts would soon be birthed into this world.

And a few days after that, the world would be destroyed.

Right now, Navrutri was working to put a stop to that. But frankly, it probably wouldn't work out. The world would end. That's what history dictated.

"Hmm, what to do?"

Though Willem was in a dreamworld, there would probably be bad effects on his real life if he died here. They needed to get out of this world before they were killed along with the rest of humanity.

(...Guess I'll pull myself together and search for anything out of place.)

No matter who created this world, their goal was to make Willem and Nephren stay here for the long term. There was a high probability that they would take an obvious approach to break them. And if he could identify that, then it would be easier to think about their chances of escape.



Nephren was reading in the shade of a tree.

Expressionless as always, she turned the pages, one after the other.

A small group of boys stood frozen a few paces away from her. They hid behind a tree, peering at her.

"What're they doing?"

Willem watched them from a window of the orphanage.

"I think it's pretty obvious what they're up to." Almaria came to stand right beside him and cackled in a rather unladylike manner. "Little Miss Nephren's a big hit. She's polite, mysterious, and she's crazy good at swordplay."

Well, now that she mentioned it, she was right. Nephren didn't say much, it was hard to tell what she was thinking, and he didn't need to say much about how she handled the sword.

"She's so small, but she's way stronger than me at level 8. Makes me feel bad."

Willem thought he heard something. He would ignore it.

"That's why the boys are so bothered about her. They want her to play with them. But she has an unapproachable air about her, so they're waiting for the perfect time to talk to her."

"...I see. She's like the admirable big sister to them."

"Ah-ha-ha, that's exactly right."

It was weird calling Nephren anyone's big sister, but that's how all young kids saw people older than them.

"Guess they're getting old enough to think about stuff like that. Warms my heart."

"Are *you* really old enough to be saying stuff like that, Dad?" Almaria smiled mischievously. "So did you ever find a lover or a fiancée in the end?"

"Uh..."

At that moment, Chtholly's face came to mind.

"...I found a great woman; then a bunch of stuff happened, and I ended up proposing."

"Huh?"

"Ah!"

Almaria and some other kid he didn't care about froze.

"R-really? Do I know her? Is it Miss Lillia? Or Emi? Or, surprise, is it Suowong? ...It's not Nephren, is it?"

"Wow, you're really invested. And that's a weird list of names there."

Lillia was Lillia, Emissa had a boyfriend, Suowong was a boy, and Nephren was a kid. None were people Willem wanted to propose to.

"Oh right, you said you met the Imperial princess once a long time ago... Don't tell me."

"That's a big leap."

He playfully and lightly smacked Almaria across the head as she got carried away.

"You don't know her. She's honest and hardworking and kind and spoiled and opinionated and simple and stupid and basically an idiot."

He didn't think he was being too harsh. He almost wanted to say *simple* and *idiot* one more time.

"...Huh." She cast a sidelong glance at him. "I see. You sound pretty similar."

"Hey, c'mon, where'd you get *that* from?"

"Bring her over next time. I'll be the best evil stepdaughter I can be."

"Come on..."

He would bring her over. He would have her meet them.

How great would it have been if he could?

Chtholly and Almaria. They'd probably get along well. They grew up in similar environments and worried about similar things—they'd probably feed off each other's energy really well.

Then their main topic of conversation would probably be insulting Willem Kmetsch... He couldn't believe how easily he'd come to that conclusion.

"Oh, they're on the move."

Willem turned his gaze back to the boys.

They had marched right up to where Nephren was, pushed a toy sword onto her, and were boisterously shouting, then pulled the girl up to her feet and dragged her off to play soldiers.

"Wow, they sure are a forceful bunch."

"They have *no* idea how to treat a girl. Guess that makes them similar to you."

"Hey, wait. I'm not that bad."

"The way you do it is different, but what you're doing is all the same."

It was sort of hard to argue against what she said. All he could do was stay quiet.

Whack. Whack, whack. They could hear the sounds of toy swords clashing against each other on the wind.

"Oh my gosh, look, look! Falco's face is bright red! He's so shy." Almaria suddenly pushed her upper body through the window, almost as though she was going to start pointing. "Awww, they're so cute..." she murmured, her face flushed with excitement.

"You're the cutest when you do that, Allie..."

He heard a stupid mutter come from right beside him.

"Oh, you were here the whole time, Ted?"

"Yes. And please stop trying to reflexively kick me out please I'm serious."

"It's a big deal you're preventing me from kicking you out, Level 8. I won't go easy on you next time when I throw you out by your neck. I'll use enough force to bump up your level if you survive."

"So you mean I won't survive?!"

Ted was easily sidestepping Willem's playful kicks. He started to enjoy himself more and slowly ramped up the speed of his attacks.

"Looks like you two are getting along, too, aren't you?" Almaria watched the two with a strangely satisfied look.

"Wait, so why are you here in the first place, Ted?"

"Well, I'm here to check on everyone, you know. Because recently, you know, I've been worried about all that stuff— Bwuh!"

Willem's heel struck him in the side.

Ted writhed in agony, with a bright smile still on his face. Skillful guy.

"All what stuff?"

"Y-you know, the stuff, the rumors about the dreams. Haven't you heard?"

All right, what was he talking about?

"There's apparently been more and more people these past few months having strange dreams at night. They all dream the same thing, and there are rumors circulating that it's some kind of omen. According to the word passed down to the Adventurers Guild from the Alliance, these dreams are happening to all different kinds of people throughout the whole continent."

"...Dreams, huh?"

To Willem, this world was already a dream. His only thought was that things would start to get complicated hearing even more about dreams.

"And there's been a little additional information as well." Ted rose, rubbing his side. "People here and there have been falling comatose without

any clear reason lately, right? They say that people who haven't been seriously ill even once before suddenly don't wake up one day."

"Really?"

"...Really. Rumor says it's the dreams that are to blame."

"...What?"

Almaria shivered slightly.

"Oh, I'm sorry; I'm sorry. It's nothing to be afraid of; it's just a rumor."

Ted smiled, dots of greasy sweat appearing on his forehead, as though he was enduring great pain. Willem almost felt like admitting the man did have grit, at least. "But still, there's not a huge number of them, and it might just be a coincidence. But it makes you worry hearing about it, doesn't it? That's why today I was coming to see Allie with the excuse of making sure everyone's all ri— Wuh!"

Tch, he dodged again. He's got a good eye.

The moment Willem was going to make a follow-up attack, the doorbell rang.

"Hmm? A visitor?"

"Oh, it might be the new book lender that opened up nearby. I keep telling them we don't want any, since they only carry really difficult books, but they come to show us whenever they have new stock in."

"All right, I'll get it."

Willem raised a hand, stopping Almaria as she was about to go for the front door. An older guy was probably more suited to dealing with insistent and annoying visitors than a young girl.

"Mm... Fine, you can do it, but don't get too violent, okay?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"A weirdo who doesn't understand limits, Dad."

Ha-ha, she sure gets me. Now that he had his family's understanding, he'd go and show this uninvited guest the thin line between life and death.

He cracked his neck and shoulders as he headed for the door.

The bell rang one more time.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm getting it."

He took the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door.

"Sorry, but our kids don't need your—"

"Hey, Will."

His gaze met with the visitor on the other side of the doorway.

He had unshaven stubble growing around his mouth and chin and wore a teasing grin on his face.

"Sure's been a while. How've you been?"

"...Oh."

Willem pressed his forehead with the tips of his fingers, fighting a sudden headache.

Right. He was *this* kind of guy.

"Long time no see, Navrutri. I've been good as usual, thanks."

He meant to respond sarcastically, but Navrutri nodded cheerfully. "That's great to hear."



"Hey, Allie, you're beautiful as always."

"Welcome, Navrutri. And you're a flatterer as always."

"Oh, hey, I'm being serious. Beautiful buds beget beautiful blossoms. I have no doubt you'll grow up to be a lovely young lady in a couple of years or so— You'll catch the eye of all the boys. I guarantee it."

"Sure, sure. I'll accept about half of what you said."

"Aw, that makes me sad. Can't you up the percentage just a bit...?"

"...Okay, wait a second, you two." Willem cut into the lively exchange.

"Al, you know Navrutri? I don't know about Suowong and the others, but I don't remember having you meet this stubbled coxcomb."

"He's been coming around to check on us lately. He's your friend, right, Dad?"

"...Navrutri. What are you doing here?"

"Hmm, well, I've been coming here a lot lately on orders from the Church. I dropped by to see if either you or Mr. Nils was around. Both of you are out most of the time, but I'm glad I caught you today," he said, with the nerve to put on a cool face.

Willem thought he was an odd one to actively want to see a weirdo like Mr. Nils—his damn teacher. And he felt a futile emptiness being treated the same way.

"And of course, meeting this lovely little lady along the way has also become an important goal for me, you know."

"All right, Navrutri, get out and tell me what you want me to write on your grave."

"Stop it, Dad... I'm sorry, Mr. Navrutri. He doesn't really understand jokes when it comes to us."

"It's not a joke, though."

"And I don't plan to leave it as a joke."

"Guys, stop it. Sheesh." Almaria sulked.

"That aside, I came to see you today, Will, to ask you a favor."

"Okay." He could practically hear his own face twitch. "I thought you told me just the other day that you weren't opening yourself to me?"

"That has nothing to do with this."

Willem had done his best to make his remark a snide one, but Navrutri brushed it off with an innocent look.

"What I'm here to talk to you about today is a different matter. You've heard the rumors, haven't you? Of more and more people falling comatose recently for unknown reasons?"

Oh, that.

They had just been talking about that. Willem glanced at Ted.

Navrutri had apparently made quite the name for himself as an Adventurer before he became a Quasi Brave, and he was spoken about as a practical legend among some Adventurers. It seemed like Ted was a part of those *some* Adventurers, and his eyes had been glittering with awe for a little while now.

Oh, give me a break. You sure are treating him way differently than you treat me, even though we're both Quasi Braves; come on—he couldn't help the thought from crossing his mind.

"...Yeah. I've heard, at least."

He wouldn't tell him they had just talked about it, though.

"Then this'll be easy. The True World is behind it."

...What?

"What kind of a name is that? It sounds like people got carried away when they were younger and just regret it a few years later," Ted murmured—something Willem thought he'd heard somewhere before.

"To put it simply, they're a heretical organization with military power. Will, our lovely companions, and I crushed them once two years ago. But it seems like they've recently started staging a comeback."

"...They were researching enchanted weapon appropriation, right? Why would that cause indiscriminate cases of comatose people, though?"

"I don't know the details. But it's estimated that it's just one part of the research they're conducting. They're basically developing an enchantment that produces perfect results, even if their subjects are chosen at random. And I guess at the same time, they're also developing technology that can broadcast it freely over a very wide range."

A deep chill ran down Willem's spine. Navrutri spoke easily, but if what he talked about became a reality, that level of technology could easily wipe out the planet.

...Oh, wait.

Now that he thought about it, that scale of threat was a given.

It was a historical fact that the world would end after this, after all. He wasn't sure how it was related to the birth of the Beasts, but it wasn't unrelated to this cutting-edge enchanted tech.

"The Imperial Council has recognized the danger of the situation and has asked the Alliance to conduct an investigation for the time being. Though the incident is reaching every corner of the continent, they want the focus of the investigation to remain on Imperial territory for now. Which means the Adventurers Guild here in Gomag will also be asked to cooperate soon."

Ted's ears perked up.

"And what do I have to do with this?" Willem asked.

"Well, actually, the Church asked me to put a Quasi Brave on board to help with the investigation in Gomag. I was just about to be forced into it."

This is weird, he thought.

It wasn't too unusual for Adventurers and Braves to work together. They did so when it came to subduing especially dangerous monstrosities, when

it came to collapsing underground mazes that were threatening to leak a miasma into the surrounding area—when an insurmountable wall stood before them, it was natural for those who had the power to stand up to the challenge to work together. Even in the battle with the Visitors, which happened not too long ago, three adventurers—Emissa, Kaya, and Hilgram—lent a hand to the Legal Brave, Lillia.

However, that was basically when the mission entailed beating or breaking something into submission. There wasn't much Braves could do in the first place on the types of missions where it wasn't certain there would be fighting.

(Guess it doesn't matter.)

Navrutri was going to be the one working anyway.

He'd probably come here to push the work onto Willem, but Willem wasn't going to let that happen.

"Glad you got some work to do. Hope you work hard."

"Aw, come on. You think you can take it for me? It's to help people in trouble, y'know."

"You're the one in trouble."

"Yeah, probably." Navrutri lightly scratched at the back of his head. "I know I might seem relaxed, but I'm actually pretty busy right now. My current mission might seriously involve the fate of the whole world."

Of course it would. The Seventeen Beasts would soon be completed, so if they didn't stop the True World's ambitions in their tracks, then the world would be destroyed.

Rather, they wouldn't be able to stop them, and they would be annihilated.

Willem knew that well.

"...Um. I'm sorry. Do you mind?" Almaria cut in on their half-baked conversation. "All those people who fall asleep and never wake up have the same weird dreams, right?"

"That's what I've heard. There hasn't been any proof yet of their causal relationship, but there have been suggestions that the dreams are connected with how susceptible someone can be to the curse." Navrutri nodded.

"And do you know what kind of dream it is?"

"Sure. The key points in the dream seem to be a gray desert all around them and an odd feeling of intense nostalgia."

Almaria looked to Ted, who gave a few quick nods.

"...Dad?"

With an uneasy look, she turned to Willem.

"What?"

Everyone shifted their gazes to Almaria, and she spoke in the faintest whisper:

"What should I do? I've always had that dream."

" — You *what?*!"

Willem's shoulders dropped with such force, they could've cracked the ground.

"Ah-ha-ha, you don't need to worry, Allie." Navrutri spoke too cheerfully for Willem's taste as he waved his hand. "This veteran Brave right here will solve this mystery for you straightaway."

"Sure pisses me off hearing someone who's got way more experience say that to me..."

He tore at his hair.

This was a dream. This Almaria was fake. He knew that. He was rationally aware of it.

And yet, still.

This thing was in the form of Almaria and spoke with Almaria's voice and called him "Dad" with Almaria's smile, and never in a million years could Willem Kmetsch abandon his daughter.

"Fine."

Never.

"Damn it. I'll take the job, okay? I'll take it."

"I knew you would."

Navrutri beamed. Willem wanted to punch him.

"—You know I'm not doing this to give myself an easier time, right? Word you're alive will spread all throughout the land through the Alliance by working alongside the Adventurers Guild." Navrutri shut one eye. He must've practiced a lot, because his wink was flawless. "So many people were sad when they heard you hadn't come back. I'm not saying you should show yourself to everyone, but you should at least let everyone know you're safe to give them peace of mind."

"Well..."

Of course, the thought had crossed his mind before.

But worry, relief, and everything else were nothing but phantom sensations in this dreamworld. When he thought about how quickly they would fade and vanish, he didn't exactly feel like doing it.

"...I don't really want to ask in this context, but what's Lillia doing?"

"Ahhh." Navrutri hesitated, his expression clouding over. "She really broke down from the battle with the Visitors. She's been in a hospital in the capital ever since."

"Oh."

He didn't care, really.

This was a fake world with a fake Lillia. And unlike Almaria, she was in the Imperial capital, so he couldn't even see her fake face.

But still. If that cockroach of a talented girl managed to survive somehow, he could probably take it as good news.

"Hmm? So you're worried about her, aren't you?"

"On a very general, worried-about-her-because-she's-our-coworker level."

"There you go again. You don't need to be so shy, you know. Love can make or break the world." He patted Willem on the back. "And so, you can just leave Allie to me, okay? Don't worry—I at least have the good sense to wait until she's grown up."

Willem balled his hand into a fist.

He took the stance of a lethal charge taught to him by Hilgram Moto himself.

"...Okay, okay, I get it—you can un-ball your fist. That's the initial stance for draconic festering, isn't it? That's the one you used to kill the rust dragon, right? Getting hit with that would really hurt, wouldn't it? It'd burst a person's body right open, wouldn't it?!"

Nephren, finally freed from the impish boys, came into the room and immediately tilted her head with a wondering look.

3. The Self-Proclaimed Daughter and the Self-Proclaimed Pet

Almaria Duffner had a dream.

There was an infinitely vast and empty gray expanse.

Occasionally, out of the corner of her eye, she saw nameless, unknown Beasts slowly pass by.

The gusts of wind left behind an odd melody in her ear.

She should've thought it an odd scene.

But strangely, she felt calmed.

Not just calmed, but deep within her heart, she even felt a longing for it.

Ah yes. This is where we should be. This is how we should be.

The voice whispered to her, its song sinking deeper and deeper into her

—



She opened her eyes.

Her heart was beating loudly in her ears.

It was that dream again. She'd had it so many times, over and over, ever since she was little.

It wasn't exactly a nightmare. It wasn't frightening, nor was it gory. She just saw and felt things she didn't understand—that was all.

But that sensation...the feeling of calm in the dream terrified her. The feeling that she wasn't herself, and yet, how that fact didn't make her sick, was so inexplicably frightening to Almaria.

She hadn't had it for a while.

When she lived in her parents' house, she had it about once every six months. When her father died and she moved to the orphanage, it lessened to once a year. Its frequency had dropped even further in recent years. So in her relief, she'd let her guard down.

"A curse that puts you to sleep forever, huh...?"

The incidents that Ted and Navrutri told her about had spurred on her anxieties. Even though they said the dream didn't necessarily mean she'd

be cursed, and their causal relationship was still undetermined, she was still afraid.

I have to get up early tomorrow, too, so I should go back to bed.

That's what she thought, but her heart, now agitated, couldn't exactly calm down. She felt like she'd see the strange scenery if she closed her eyes again, so she couldn't even do that.

"...Sigh."

Oh well. Rolling around in bed like this wouldn't solve anything, either.

She'd have a glass of water to refresh herself.

With that in mind, she got out of bed and threw a cardigan over her shoulders.

Her body shivered slightly.

The small fire in the stove burned with quiet crackles.

As she came to the living room, she found a girl sleeping on the couch. It looked like she'd lost the battle with drowsiness in the middle of reading a book. Someone had placed a blanket on her, but it was slipping off.

"Nephren..."

She'd heard the girl was a Quasi Brave and Willem's junior.

She came from a country far away and didn't really know the Imperial language, but she studied hard, and in just a few days, she was able to hold simple conversations. "Since the grammar is similar, it's easy" was how she talked. But still, she felt like it was a little too outrageous. All the Braves were people who felt that way.

But as she slept, curled up and hugging her book, she just looked like a child.

Almaria gently stroked her ashen hair. It was soft and warm, like a baby's.

She could move her finger just a little more to poke her soft-looking cheek—

"...No, no, wait."

She stopped herself.

"The blanket, right. I need to put the blanket back on her. Otherwise, she'll get sick."

Just as she moved to grasp the blanket and murmured to herself—

Nephren's eyes opened.

"...Almaria?"

"Wh-what? Did I wake you?"

"Mm..." With a drowsy gaze, Nephren looked around the room. "Did I fall asleep?"

"I'm sorry—I was just going to fix the blanket on you," she lied. "Now that you're up, you should go to sleep properly in a real bed. It gets pretty cold here at night, so you'll get sick."

"Okay."

Nephren nodded but didn't sit up. She still looked half-asleep.

"...I was just going to have a little tea. Do you want some, too?"

"Okay."

Nephren nodded again, still not quite fully awake.

She's kind of like a puppy, Almaria thought.

And so, that's how the strange little tea party started in the middle of the night.

Almaria tried her hand at brewing some herbal tea, which supposedly helped calm nerves. She'd bought this kind immediately after someone recommended it to her, and she didn't even know the name of the leaves, but it was perfect for just the two of them to drink in the middle of the night like this.

Cookies went with tea. She'd hidden some deep in the cupboard just for times like these.

Nephren must not have liked hot things very much because she blew and blew on her cup.

"Nephren, what's your relationship with our dad?"

The question suddenly spilled from her mouth.

She realized after the fact that it sounded like she was interrogating her.

"...I'm sorry. I worded that wrong. I'm not, like, suggesting you have some sort of impure relationship, but you know..." She found it hard to find the right words. "I heard you're his junior Brave, but it doesn't really feel like that's all there is to it."

That was it—ever since Almaria first saw the girl, she thought it strange.

Willem treated Nephren like something very precious.

She also could sense that Nephren herself also cared greatly for Willem.

And from the outside, their attitudes toward each other were very natural.

It didn't really seem like a romantic relationship or that kind of thing, though.

"Mm..." Nephren thought for a moment. "A pet."

A pet.

That wasn't what she was expecting.

Almaria, who'd had a vague smile on her face up until that moment, suddenly grew serious. This might be something she needed to question her dad about as well.

"Willem looked like he would fall apart if he was alone. So it is my job to stay by his side. I recently learned the secret to mastering this is to stay just close enough that I might be in his way."

"Oh... Okay, that's what you mean."

She'd ended up imagining something a little too extreme when she heard the word *pet*, but this girl had apparently used the word with the nuance of a close friend.

Almaria felt relieved, and her expression relaxed.

She almost forgot when they chatted normally like this, but Nephren had only just learned the local language, and her vocabulary should still have

been lacking. Almaria interpreted that as being the reason why her word choice was so eccentric.

"But...", Nephren continued, a small and somewhat sad smile appearing on her lips. "Willem here is different. It doesn't feel like he will fall apart."

"...Really?"

Almaria couldn't compare, since she didn't know what Willem was like outside the orphanage.

"I don't think he needs me by his side anymore."

"...You think so?"

She'd known Willem very well when he was in the orphanage, and she didn't quite agree.

"You know how he is. He'll definitely leave and go someplace else again. I can't go with him when that happens, so maybe he will start to fall apart again, like you said." She poured herself another cup of herbal tea. "Then, I'll have no choice but to have you take care of him, Miss Nephren. You'll have to do something about my miserable piece-of-junk dad somehow."

"Almaria..."

Nephren looked at her with surprise.

She hadn't expected those words to come out of her mouth, either.

"Okay. You can count on me, then."

Nephren gave a slight yet somehow powerful nod.

The tea party was over, and Almaria put away the tea set. She returned to her room.

(Dad always has really wonderful women around him, doesn't he?)

She wriggled her way under the blankets. There wasn't much time until dawn, but she felt like this time, she could sleep soundly.

4. The Adventurers

More than half of Adventurers were originally untrained, foolhardy dreamers.

Though it sounds like a given, their way of life was unstable, and societal trust in them was practically nonexistent. On top of that, the return rate of Adventurers who went off to fight monstrosities or whatnot was surprisingly low.

The Adventurers Guild was a mutual-aid organization for these Adventurers. They were universal, with establishments located throughout the continent and even two or more in larger cities, all operating on individual profits.

The Alliance was then the superordinate organization, created as a system for all the Guilds in every location to facilitate in mutual aid.

The frameworks they put in place, such as the level system, that they normalized transformed the foolhardy dreamers into trained explorers. They stabilized their income, which had been an unfavorable gamble before then, to a certain degree, and pulled up the survival rates considerably.



"It's a Brave..."

"Yo, a Brave..."

"A Brave, huh...?"

He hated how clearly he could hear their whispers.

They stared at him with a mottled pattern of jealousy, hatred, and admiration.

(I'm used to it, but it's still uncomfortable...)

He tightly swallowed the sigh that wanted to escape and looked around.

He was at the entrance of the only Adventurers Guild in Gomag. A group of a dozen or so men and women was gathered in the spacious room.

They were all staring straight at Willem, their gazes full of mixed emotions.

(Man, they sure do hate us.)

He smiled wryly, feigning ignorance.

The reason was because Adventurers were generally treated like hoodlums and scoundrels who simply had a little more muscle than most. And on the other hand, Braves continually stood at the front lines in battle with other races in order to protect the emnetwiht race—heroes among heroes. At least, that's how things ordinarily were.

And it was a similar story when their positions were reversed. Braves generally could not choose their own battles. Though portrayed so beautifully, Braves were essentially hired mercenaries for the Church of Exalted Light. Defeat or escape were unforgivable. They were to continue to fight and win as ordered. From their perspective, the Adventurers' way of life seemed so laid-back and free.

Those were only a few examples of how each side felt. There were plenty of other things that caused friction between them. So excluding exceptions like Navrutri, who knew both perspectives, Adventurers and Braves were typically on bad terms.

"And *this* is why I didn't want to come here..."

Willem recalled his time on Island No. 28 and the cold stares he received as a featureless. His gaze wandered upward, and he gave a light sigh in frustration.

"...Sir Willem Kmetsch," the girl at reception called, her voice quavering slightly. "I've confirmed your rights and recognize you as a Quasi Brave of the Church of Exalted Light. Once again, we humbly ask for your cooperation in this series of missions."

"Oh, sure. I'll help you out."

"Th-then, if you wouldn't mind, please fill out these forms."

"Hold on, hold on. You don't need to talk like that." He waved his hand. "I highly doubt you act this businesslike all the time in this Guild—this place is just a remodel of a cheap tavern anyway. We're working together now. We're friends. Just talk to me normally. And"—he whirled his head around.—"if you guys got anything to say, you better say it with your mouths and not your eyes."

The group all looked away in unison. Except one—

“...Sure. I’ll take ya up on that offer.”

—He stared straight at Willem.

The large dark-skinned fellow stood slowly from his chair. Every step he took as he drew closer was firm. His physique was admirable, and for a moment, Willem even thought he was a giganto. But he wasn’t. He was an emnetwiht.

It looked like he was walking casually, but he wasn’t. Just by looking at the way he shifted his weight and center of balance, he could at least tell that this man wasn’t an amateur. Willem was a little impressed.

“’S as you said. This Guild’s just a touched-up cheap tavern. It ain’t a fancy place. One spoon falls to the floor, and a whole fight’ll break out. Most folks’ll spend the night in a detention house or the clinic instead of their own homes. That’s the kinda place this is.”

“Huh.”

Those are pretty cheap threats, Willem thought.

His vocabulary was just a touch tougher than the classic phrases of a third-rate thug. To be honest, it had caught Willem a little off guard, since he’d just appraised his physical strength.

Well, still, it wasn’t a terrible development.

It was the organization leadership who decided they would work together. That reason alone didn’t make it easy for people to get along, and even more so when the two parties involved didn’t quite get along, like the Braves and Adventurers.

And the best way to settle this kind of situation was to let their honest opinions clash. And even better if their fists did the talking. Of course, there would be no point if he totally clobbered his opponent, so he would need to be delicate with his execution.

The guy standing before Willem seemed pretty tough. He could probably put a little strength into his punch, and he’d be all right. The problem was acting convincingly that he took damage when he got hit, but...he could probably put it to an end somehow by cutting the inside of his mouth, at most.

“So that’s why—”

The man’s gaze, which had been glaring straight at Willem, turned to his side.

“—you shouldn’t be bringin’ little kids to this place. No one under fifteen’s allowed in here.”

“.....Huh?”

“And she’s such a nice-looking kid, too. Can’t imagine why you’re bringing her in here, but it ain’t good for her education.”

Nephren tilted her head slightly.

“Um...”

Willem looked around the Guild and found that most of the people there were looking away from him, but the rest all nodded.

"Uh... Right. Right, you're right. Sorry."

"If you're gonna apologize, apologize to her."

"O-oh. Sorry, Ren, can you wait outside a sec?"

"Okay."

Nephren nodded meekly and shuffled out of the Guild.



Thirty minutes later, she was in a passenger carriage making its rounds within the city.

The wagon of the horse-drawn carriage could fit four people, and every seat was taken.

Nephren watched as the scenery flew past, her eyes gleaming all the while.

The majority of vehicles on Island No. 68, where the faerie warehouse was located, were transport carts. They weren't for carrying people around at high speed. So for Nephren, who was raised on the island, the scenery scrolling past accompanied with the clattering of the cart was a whole new experience for her.

(Airships are probably in a totally different category for her...)

If she had a tail, it would most certainly be wagging back and forth. She was so happy that it gave him that impression. If rushing through Gomag, which didn't have anything remarkable about it, was enough to make her this excited, he wondered how she would act if he took her to the capital.

He pulled his gaze away from Nephren and looked straight ahead.

There was Ted, clutching his stomach in a fit of loud laughter.

"...Is it really that funny?"

"Of course it is! Oh gosh, I wish I could've seen it. I probably won't have the chance to see you so overwhelmed for a good while. I can't believe I missed it."

He had been acting like this ever since he heard about the incident at the Adventurers Guild.

Ugh, seriously, I want to punch him.

"I really underestimated how complacent things've gotten here. Had no idea the Guild'd be as lukewarm as that."

"I mean, what can you do about it?" Ted said, wiping the tears away from his eyes. "There are no underground labyrinths here or any strong monsters living in the area. The really violent types transfer straightaway to Guilds in other cities where there's plenty of work like that."

"Regular people with common sense shouldn't be Adventurers. They should get real jobs..."

"But the adventure, the ambition!"

I'm talking about you, Ted.

...Well, it was probably okay. He didn't want the story of his embarrassing incident to drag on forever.

"But still. Are you *really* a Quasi Brave?"

The last of the four riding in the carriage, a woman wearing red, light leather armor sitting next to Ted, stared at Willem pointedly.

She seemed just a little older than he was, about twenty or perhaps a bit more. Even though he was used to inquisitive glances, when it was a girl so close to him both in age and proximity, it made him just a little restless.

"You're all spindly, and your face has this blank look to it, and you even said you don't have a personal Carillon." She glanced at Nephren, who sat beside him. "And you take a kid along with you on your work. Put that all together, and you don't strike me as very capable."

Willem knew very well that there was no drive or power in his own outward appearance.

"Yeah. I hear that a lot."

"Hmm. There's not a lot of spirit in your answer, either. That's no good. Men today need to be proactive to get what they want."

"...Yeah, y'know. I'm well aware."

The woman furrowed her brow.

"You're not like a Brave at all. The last one I met was way different. I dunno what else to call it, but he was superconfident. He would say things like, *I'll take on all the battles, so you weaklings should stay back*, all cheery-like."

"Huh..."

There were normally around thirty Quasi Braves at any given time. The roster changed frequently due to the nature of the job. And since almost every one of them was sent off to battle all over the continent, even a fellow Brave could be acquainted with only so many Quasi Braves.

And despite that, Willem still felt like he knew a guy like that.

"I knew he meant well, and he was definitely way stronger than us. But it still pissed me off, you know?"

She turned to Ted for agreement, and he said vaguely with a shrug, "Mm."

"So when I heard I was going to be working with a Quasi Brave, I was getting myself ready to be paired up with another guy who would piss me off. But then I saw it was just some nice guy. I feel like I've been tricked. How are you going to make this up to me?"

"That's not my job..."

"If it isn't, then whose is it?"

Does that really matter?

"Quasi Braves are emnetwiht, too."

"Hmm, that's not a cute thing to say."

The wheel of the carriage must have snagged on a pebble; the whole cart shook with a *clunk*.

"Okay, that's enough, Ms. Luzie, Willem. We should get to the topic at hand soon." Ted clapped his hands together lightly.

"Sure, we can do that, but having you change the subject kind of irritates me, Theodore," Luzie quipped.

"Yeah. I can't help but feel irked when I see you act all high and mighty, Ted."

"Please don't let that become the catalyst for your friendship. Let me just make sure you both know that our work this time is taking a comatose man to the city hospital, okay?"

"Yeah, I know." The woman named Luzie nodded slightly. "His name's Odle N. Gracis. Forty-seven, a painter. Lives with his wife, who's forty-five. This is day three since he fell into a coma. His wife realized what happened two days ago when she went to wake him in the morning like she always did."

A flock of pigeons flew right beside the carriage, loudly flapping their wings.

Nephren's gaze followed the white mass up to the sky.

"Erm, Ms. Luzie? A question." Ted raised his hand. "Did she say if this Mr. Odle was having any weird dreams?"

"She did. It sounds like he told his wife about his *funny dream* several times. She said he saw a vast gray desert that continued as far as the eye could see—"

Willem narrowed his eyes slightly. Almaria said she'd seen the same scenery, too.

And...even though he didn't know if it had anything to do with the incident...both Willem and Nephren knew that scenery well. He saw it not in a dream as he slept, nor within this dreamworld (*phew, that's confusing*), but with his own eyes in the real world.

"—With creatures that he'd never seen before that looked like Beasts, roaming the desert—"

That also lined up with Almaria's testimony.

And that also matched Willem's and Nephren's own experiences in the real world.

"—And he apparently heard some kind of song."

"A song?"

The question slipped from his mouth. The land Willem knew might've been a gray desert with the Beasts roaming around, but he didn't recall ever hearing a song.

"Yeah, a song. She said he couldn't remember the tune or the words, but it was definitely a song." Luzie glanced at the notes in her hand. "And this Mr. Odle apparently felt a strange longing for this desert and the beasts and the song. And this feeling apparently got stronger with each iteration, so the second time, it was stronger than the first, and the third time was much stronger, and so on and so forth."

"Do you think the dreams and the coma curse are intertwined somehow?"

"I dunno. We could say anything at this point, which is why we can't say anything. The hospital will carry out a thorough examination on him, and then we could probably narrow it down from there," Luzie said before turning her gaze to Willem. "Has our veteran Quasi Brave picked up on anything so far?" she asked wickedly.

"Yeah. I've got information on the True World's base. You know, the guys the Empire and the Alliance and the Church think are behind the curse."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Both Adventurers let slip a vacant utterance.

"Why this, all of a sudden?"

"The coma incidents are happening all across the continent, but regardless, the Alliance began their investigations only within the Empire. The Church added on a Quasi Brave to help with the investigation here in Gomag, which the Empire and the Alliance accepted. There's clearly something unnatural about the whole turn of events." Willem turned to the two as they stared at him blankly and continued. "The three parties should be sharing information that predicts the True World will try an armed resistance, as well as evidence to make that prediction convincing."

"Why?"

"Regardless of the *why*, the Braves fight far and wide to protect the emnetwiht. At least, that's how the Church advertises them, and they take plenty of measures to make the public believe that. And they've gone through the trouble of throwing Braves into the mix from the sidelines. That means the Church is almost a hundred percent sure this is gonna cause an emnetwiht-wide war. Not only that, but it's also extremely possible that since they allowed the interference, the Empire and Alliance share that confidence."

Incidentally, the fact that Navrutri was investigating the True World while staying here in Gomag was incredibly suspicious. Not only that, but there was also what Suowong, the Great Sage, had told him in the sky: The group that released the Beasts had established their base in a small town on the outskirts of the Empire.

But of course, he couldn't say any of that to the two sitting before him.

"Hold... Hold on a sec!" Luzie interrupted. "You have to be kidding, right? I didn't know this job was going to be *that* dangerous!"

"Then complain to the Guild and negotiate better pay or something." Willem turned his gaze outside the window. "All the Adventurers I've worked with in the past did."

"...I know this is a little late for this, but you really *are* a Quasi Brave, Willem."

Ted seemed as if he'd had an epiphany.

"What was that, Ted? You wanna say something to me?"

"I was just thinking how it's hard to suddenly believe what you see when someone close to you reveals an unexpected side to them."

"I don't remember us being close."

"I already know it's going to be a long fight for that, so I'll just take my time."

"I have no idea what you're saying."

The carriage stopped.

"—Looks like we've made it. We walk from here."

Ted opened the carriage door just as he was finished speaking and hopped onto the flagstone path below.

(...The True World, huh.)

He repeated the nostalgic yet ominous name to himself.

They destroyed the land. He couldn't change that at this point. And even if Willem somehow managed to crush their ambitions in this world, that didn't mean the real, ruined world would come back to life. He and Nephren were supposed to be careful observers in order to find a way out of this dream to begin with, so they shouldn't be meddling too much with the history of this world. He knew that. He knew.

And yet, the reason why he took on the job was because Almaria had surprisingly shown weakness, even though she was typically tough. It was definitely not because Navrutri had talked him into it.

(Well... At this point, I may as well do my job and hunt them down.)

He went over the basic information he had on them from when he originally looked them up back when they crushed them the first time and the briefing he got when he took on this job.

They were a religious group derived from the Church of Exalted Light. They shared the same basic scripture, and their teachings weren't too different. The reason why they had a military, of all things, and ended up picking fights with the Empire was apparently because of a single added sentence to their teachings: "The way the world should be is not as it is now." They followed this doctrine and made efforts to attack and destroy the wrong world and bring in the right one.

For all the creatures living in the world, it was a total nuisance.

And the result of the nuisance was that the shape of the world itself really was redrawn—what a bother that was.

There was a bit of distance between the Odle guy's house and where the passenger carriage was stopped.

The four strolled through a confusing residential district on the east side of Gomag.

"...Hey."

Willem spotted a roasted chestnut stall on the side of the road.

There were lots of chestnut trees in the forests around Gomag. One could sell them without spending any money by roasting the collected chestnuts as is and handing them out wrapped in newspaper. Shops like

these popped up all throughout the city in the fall, filling the air with a delicious scent.

Most of the stalls vanished by the time winter came, but they didn't all completely disappear. They sometimes suddenly appeared like this, enticing the appetite. It was a seasonal reminder that repeated itself every year—for Willem, the first time in two years—for the people who lived in this town.

"Hold on a sec," he said to the other three, and jogged over to the stall. He checked to see how many chestnuts were on the fire, then ordered enough for the four of them. The stall owner took the freshly roasted chestnuts, wrapped them in old newspaper, and handed them over to Willem. He took them and returned to the rest.

"It's not chestnut season anymore, though."

"Don't worry about it. I just wanted some."

He practically tossed the packages of chestnuts to the trio.

"They're hot, so be careful."

Nephren nodded silently as she opened the package.

"Baked...tree nuts?"

"Doesn't matter why—if you're in Gomag during this season, you can't not eat these," he said as he plucked one from the pack and popped it into his mouth. It was hot.

Though their season of autumn had already passed, they were still delicious.

(—Winter, huh?)

He suddenly remembered something.

(Right, my birthday's not too far.)

It wasn't entirely irrelevant. Though it would mark the beginning of the seventeenth year since Willem Kmetsch came into the world, it didn't really have much to do with him here and now. Willem in reality was over five hundred years old, so he didn't really feel like thinking seriously about his own age.

Butter cake.

I'm a big fan of your butter cake. I want a really big one on my next birthday.

It came to him.

He suddenly recalled the very words he'd said himself, and the hand gripping the chestnut stopped.

(...Right.)

For him, that was a promise he never kept.

A thorn that had stayed pierced deep in his heart for a long time.

Exchanging new promises with Chtholly and *both* fulfilling them had eased the pain of the thorn, and it had faded from Willem's memory. But...

For this Almaria, it was different.

To her, it hadn't been that long since the day he made that promise. It wasn't a past event to her. So since Willem's birthday was soon, that meant the day she should fulfill her promise was drawing near.

"Man..."

A strange prickling sensation tickled the underside of his consciousness.

Something was off. That was what his instinct told him, but he couldn't tell what exactly that was.

"...You're a strange person, Willem," Ted said as he blew on his chestnut to cool it.

Willem was pulled out from his thoughts.

"What now?"

"Well, I thought you'd end up excluding me, like *I ain't got no chestnuts for you*. I was surprised to see how naturally I took them from you."

Oh.

"...That didn't even cross your mind, did it?"

"Oh, well, y'know, *that's not it. I was gonna say something like If you want these chestnuts, then you'd better give up on my daughter.*"

"Are you serious? If I said yes, then that would make Allie a cheaper girl than roasted chestnuts, you know."

Rrrrrgh.

"You've gotten trickier with your words."

"That's because I can say anything, and you'll always argue back. I feel like it's something very worth doing."

"Your personality's gone rotten."

"People get corrupted when they go without experiencing honest romance."

Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh! Nephren's face was bright red and her eyes were watering from having tossed a still hot chestnut into her mouth. "What is this child doing?!" Luzie howled as she ran to a nearby public well, drew some water, and passed it to Nephren. That's right—anyone who wasn't used to the roasted chestnuts always did this at least once. It was heartwarming and nostalgic.

"—Hey, Ted. Can I ask you something weird?"

"Sure."

"Let's say..." Willem hesitated. "...I go off to battle somewhere far away and never come back. Would you make Almaria happy in my stead?"

Of course! Why, do you have plans for that in the near future?! Then please, do leave it to me! Oh, I know it's still a little while now, but would you mind if we named the child after you?

That's what he thought he'd say.

"No."

"...Hmm?"

"I won't do such a thing. I don't even want to think of it as a possibility."

"Why? Aren't I in your way?"

"You are. I always wish you'll just get kicked by a horse already. But these two things have nothing to do with each other. I will never make promises I can't keep."

"You don't think you can make her happy?"

"Of course not."

He said it so easily.

"The only way she'd be happy in marriage is if her precious dad gave her his blessing. That's why you need to stay close until that happens, Willem. Didn't I just say this? I know it's going to be a long fight, and I'm ready... Oh, but I don't really mind how quickly you vanish afterward, of course. Actually, it'd be best if you just went away once the whole thing was over with."

"Ah, okay. I get it."

The winter chill was steadily seeping into the wrapped package of roasted chestnuts.

Willem took three of the cooled and hardening chestnuts and chucked them all into his mouth, crunching away on them.

"So do you have plans to go and fight far away, then?"

"Mm... No, not really. Just wanted to ask."

It wasn't a lie. But he couldn't be honest about it, either.

He did have plans. But they were already done and through with. He certainly did go far away to fight and never came home.

"...I plan on living another five hundred years, 'kay? If you want my daughter, you better come at me with your fists and the goal of surpassing me."

"That's a big hurdle," Ted replied with a cheerful smile.

"It's hard to tell when guys are talking, but...does he really have a daughter that old? How old is that Quasi Brave?" Luzie asked Nephren quietly.

Nephren gave a moment of thought.

"Five hundred and forty-something."

And she, too, responded quietly.

Luzie could only press her fingers to her temples.



They rang the bell.

They could hear the high-pitched clanging coming from inside the house.

"...No answer."

"Looks like they're out. That's weird—I thought the Guild was in contact with them."

The four exchanged glances, standing before the Odle guy's house. It sure felt unfulfilling coming all this way for nothing.

Luzie put her hand on the knob and turned it.

"Huh?"

The door pushed open.

"It wasn't locked."

"That's pretty careless. This isn't a very safe area."

"But it's perfect for us, right? They might be out for a few, but we'll just let ourselves in and wait."

"Uh, hey—hold on, Ms. Luzie!"

Ted followed Luzie as she boldly stepped into the room.

"Is this okay for emnetwiht to do?!"

"It's a gray area" came the response as Willem and Nephren followed in after them.

The apartment didn't have many windows, as was typical for communal residences crammed into small plots of land. Even when the sun was high in the sky, the room inside was dim, and a different kind of cold from the winter chill outside enveloped them.

—*Hmm?*

Willem lightly furrowed his brow. Something felt strange to him.

"Ren," he called to her in a low voice. "Be ready."

That seemed to be enough for her to grasp what Willem wanted to say. Nephren's expression sobered, she slightly adjusted her breathing, and she began to quietly kindle her venenum.

"Hellooo, is anybody hooome?" As they did that, Luzie shuffled along the hallway, peering around at the other side of the open door. "Mr. Gracis, if you're home, then plea—"

A blade silently pressed closer to her neck—

The sound of metal.

"...Wha—?"

Luzie let slip an odd noise.

A dull black sword had stopped just a hairbreadth away from her neck.

Keeping the blade in check was a knife of common make, handed out to all the Adventurers by the Guild. It was a convenient and excellent little thing, perfect for chopping away at the underbrush, cutting rope, or taking apart dead animals. But it wasn't meant for combat.

Boom. There was a great noise that reverberated in his gut, like a wall being smashed down by a big hammer.

With immense force, both the black sword and the cloaked man gripping the handle were blown back.

"Huh?"

Willem slipped past the Adventurers and their perplexed noises to enter the room.

Beside the man he'd just sent flying, altogether there were three suspicious men wearing hooded cloaks, and all three brandished curved black swords over their heads, ready to cut Willem. There was no agitation in their steps—or even sound. He could tell just by the way they moved that all three of his opponents were incredibly skilled.

This knife wouldn't do the trick anymore.

He'd borrowed it from Ted's belt without permission and used it to stop the sword, but the sword had cut halfway into the knife's blade. He could

tell that if he tried the same thing again, it would just snap in half. So without a moment's hesitation, he threw the blade into the air.

He activated a bit of venenum and used his Sight. Nothing. Which meant these guys weren't using magic or any powers of the sort. And that was enough information for him.

He took one deep breath, stopped—and ran.

One of the men's bodies suddenly flew up vertically. He rammed against the ceiling with such force, it almost broke the boards with an explosive sound of impact. The other men reflexively looked in that direction. Willem moved as he pulled his fist back. It was easy to calculate where their blind spots were when they were all looking in the same direction, so he could stab them off guard without bothering with a feint. He lowered his stance, slipped his body through the shadows and corners of the room, then cleanly sliced off another man's head.

Just one left.

He took a deep breath in, a quiet whistling sound trailing him as he closed the distance between the final person with impossible speed. He pressed himself close to the last man's chest, and with simply a single—

The man twisted out of the way.

He just barely managed to avoid the attack at the last second. The black sword sliced through the air where Willem's neck had been just a second earlier. The button on his collar had caught on the tip of the blade, ripped off, and was sailing through the air.

(...He saw through the Nightingale Sweep, huh?)

That wasn't surprising. Nightingale Sweep was well-known. Though the number of people who could actually pull it off was few, many knew the name and what it was like. So it wasn't unusual for those who reached a certain level of emnetwiht combat ability to adopt measures against those who had mastered the move, even if they couldn't use it themselves.

He thought he noticed laughter in the man's eyes—*I see all the cards in your hand, boy!*

(Heh.)

Willem dashed at him again. His first movements were just the same as they were before. The man reflexively looked for the Nightingale Sweep and sliced his curved blade against Willem's trajectory, then—

There was a strong blow to the back of his neck. His eyes rolled back, and he fell unconscious.

Willem wasn't nice enough to repeat a skill the guy already had a read on. What he just pulled off was a Haze Step, one whose initial movements were similar to that of the Nightingale Sweep. It wasn't normal for a fighter to differentiate the various kinds of movements with all their different starting stances. The man probably never knew why Willem ended up behind him.

Ted's knife, the one he'd tossed into the air, finally fell to the floor with a clear *thud*.

Luzie plopped onto her behind on the spot.

"What was that noise?!" Ted rushed into the room.

Nephren wore a sour expression as she calmed her venenum. She was probably dissatisfied, having been unable to do anything.

"Phew."

Willem released the fog from his chest with a sigh.

It hadn't been a hard fight. But he almost wished it had been just a tad easier.

In times like these, Navrutri, for example, who'd mastered the Haze Step, would've snapped them all away on the first strike from a distance. Suowong would've engraved some thaumaturgy that would bind them all in an instant. Hilgram would've knocked them all unconscious with a shout, without lifting a single finger. Emissa would've...blasted them all away with a venenum explosion along with the room itself. Probably.

For Willem, who didn't have any overwhelming special moves like that, his only choice was to fight with a patchwork of plain skills to suit the occasion, like a trick.

That's why he had a wide variety of these plain skills. There was no trouble at all if he was in a situation where one or two of his moves weren't appropriate, and he could fight as optimally as possible in almost any given battle. His military gains had gone up, and Navrutri even teased him as "the strongest Quasi Brave."

But tricks were nothing but tricks. He couldn't pass over the wall, so all he was doing was jumping up and down in front of it in every way he could think possible.

Even if he could skillfully execute the things he was originally able to do, that still wouldn't let him do things he couldn't do. No matter how harshly he could beat people weaker than him, that wouldn't change the reality that he couldn't win against those who were stronger.

But of course, this backward way of thinking wouldn't solve anything. He could cry for the moon, but nothing would happen. The smart way of doing things would be to leave the work for people who had it all to the people who had it all. Allotting responsibilities like that made the world go round.

I want to protect them with my own hands. I want to be able to protect them.

That was what he wished for the day he first took a sword into his hands, and he should have been more grown up by now.

"In...incredible..."

Willem heard Luzie's astonished remark and snapped back to reality.

"Don't tell me those were those True World people?!"

Ted was quicker to grasp the situation than Willem thought he'd be. His sword was unsheathed, and his eyes were swimming back and forth on alert. Willem was impressed—*You sure are at home here, aren'tcha, Level 8?* But unfortunately for him, the fight was already over.

"Ted." Willem motioned to him to put away his sword. "Our job's over there."

He turned his gaze to the far corner of the room, where a single older woman sat shivering.

"Ah... Could you be Mrs. Gracis?"

The woman nodded furiously.

"What a relief." Ted smiled brightly. "We came on behalf of the Guild to get Mr. Odle. It's all right—you can relax now. And when you're ready, why don't you tell us in detail what happened?"

The caution in the woman's eyes visibly melted.

Ted was polite, friendly, and charismatic. No matter how many battle techniques he had under his command, Willem could never do what Ted did. And Ted's way was probably the right way for people to be.

They took the sleeping Odle N. Gracis back to the Guild.

And while they were at it, they wrapped up the attackers in rope and handed them over.

According to Mrs. Gracis, just before the party from the Guild—Ted and the others—came to see them, those men had forced their way in. They silently unlocked the door, which had been locked, wordlessly held her down, and were about to abduct the sleeping Mr. Odle.

Basically, had the Adventurers' arrival been even slightly delayed, both the men and Mr. Odle might've been gone by the time they got there. *We were so lucky; the gods protected us*, Mrs. Gracis repeated over and over behind tears of gratitude.

(The gods protected you, huh?)

Of course, he wouldn't say his honest thoughts out loud that that wasn't the case.

The ancient Visitors were already extinct. The last surviving one, Elq Hrqstn, had been about to exterminate mankind but was beaten back by the Legal Brave (supposedly). No matter how much people believed in them and prayed to them, there was nothing left in this world to receive their prayers.

"—So those were enemies who required the Braves to intervene?" Luzie asked.

"Yeah. They were a little tough for regular Adventurers, huh?"

"*Tough?* If you hadn't been there, I'd be dead."

Really, though? Willem hadn't sensed any bloodlust from the men. He felt like had he not stopped the blade heading for Luzie's neck, it would have stopped after piercing a single layer of skin anyway. That wasn't to say they didn't hold the power of life and death over them, though.

"You cursing me for getting you wrapped up in dangerous stuff?"

There was lots of friction between the Adventurers and the Braves.

In Willem's experience, the biggest reason was this: When Braves were on the scene, that meant the battle was going to become even more precarious. And fear in response to danger dulled people's judgment. They called Braves the harbingers of danger, a plague on the Adventurers.

Let's say there had been only one casualty until a Brave showed up. No matter how much they struggled afterward, they would demand the Brave take responsibility for the injury. They'd throw stones at them, blaming them. And of course, they wouldn't let them stand up for themselves or protest their claims. This happened a lot. He'd never gotten used to it, but he accepted it.

"Nah, you saved us, so I don't really have any reason to be mad at you," she said breezily. "And... I guess, to be honest, I thought you looked pretty slick."

Her gaze was still lost in space when she said that to him.

Upon closer inspection, he could see a slight pink tinge to her cheeks. Seriously?

"Oh, sorry, but it's not that. How should I say this—I'm not gonna crush on you or anything. It sounds like I'd have a lot of competition, and you've got an older daughter anyway, and—" Luzie laughed out loud, and cruel words came from her mouth. *"You don't seem the type to grow old and happy with."*

Oh, I see.

It was odd how readily he accepted what she said.

The phrase sounded like it accurately described what kind of man Willem was.

He always wished he could make someone happy.

But on the flip side, had he ever wanted someone to make *him* happy?

"I would be so chuffed if I could provide happiness for you five, ten years down the line. That is the biggest reason why I wouldn't mind so much being tied to you."

He remembered Nygglotho saying that to him once upon a time.

The person he was then hadn't been able to accept her goodwill.

He hadn't been able to look her directly in the eye while aware of her desire to make the individual known as Willem Kmetsch happy. In the end, he gave her the horrible answer of *Can I pretend that I never heard any of this?* He said that while leaning on the idea that she would probably easily forgive his terribleness with a smile.

"H-hello? Did I say something wrong? Did I dig up some bad memories or something?"

"Nope, not at all." He smiled vaguely. "You've got a good eye. You're probably right."



Before they carried Odle away, they got permission from his wife to inspect his body.

And the result was totally off.

No matter how much strength Willem put into his Sight, he didn't find any traces suggesting a curse. Even when he put pressure on various parts

of his body with his fingers and checked how his eyes were working, he didn't spot anything unusual. The man just seemed like he was snoozing peacefully.

"—I would absolutely sense the spell if he was the victim of the enchantment experiments. It's possible his coma is completely natural and has nothing to do with the broadcasted curse...", he mumbled to himself. "In that case, that means these True World guys don't know if the broadcast is really happening at random—and who it's working on. Those men attacking us means that they couldn't get any info on the comatose people on their own, so they must've been snatching up info that got to the Guild from the side. Maybe it's the backstabber Navrutri was talking about who's doing it —"

He kept mumbling.

"Willem."

"The research they're really concentrating on is the Beasts, and these comas are just an uncontrollable by-product as of now. Are they collecting samples to control that, then? That sounds possible, but then the question of why the land in the future is being shown in dreams—"

"Willem."

"Are they giving the power of premonition to the public? Don't know why or what for, but that sounds plausible enough. Damn it, I just can't narrow this— Ow!"

Nephren pinched his rear.

"...What're you doing?"

"It's your fault. I've been calling you, but you weren't listening."

Her expression was sour, her lips slightly pouted.

"What? You need something?"

"Of course. Stop thinking by yourself."

She lightly gripped his sleeve.

"This is unusual. You usually just come up to me and cling to me whenever you want."

"Because it felt like everything would break if I left you alone."

Right, he thought he remembered her saying something like that once before.

"Then why were you so hesitant this time?"

"...Because you seemed okay, even if I left you alone."

"Hmm?"

"I felt like I was going to fall apart, alone."

"What are you talking about?"

"...It's nothing. Forget it."

Nephren walked alongside Willem, a tentative hold on only his sleeve.

"Okay."

He grabbed her by the nape of the neck and pulled her in close to him. She gave a little yelp.

"Ha-ha, you sure are warm."

“...I am not your personal warmer.”

“I know; I know.”

His hand hovered over her head to rustle her hair...but he didn't.

Nephren openly leaned against Willem, giving up on getting away from him, and she looked up to him.

“So do you know who's dreaming?” she asked.

“Hmm? Well, at the moment, we know of Al, and the Mr. Odle guy, and then... I think there was a list at the Guild...”

“Not that.”

Nephren shook her head, somehow sadly.

“Someone dreamed this world. But it can't be made with your memories. You said there should be someone who knows this town better than you do...right?”

—*Oh.*

“Did you forget?”

“No, I didn't.”

This fake city of Gomag was all too similar to the real thing.

It included details that no one would even think to look for. The more he investigated it and the longer he stayed here, other conclusions seemed more and more unlikely.

(It might be weirder to think that this was created from the memories of just one person.)

When he thought about how accurately the town was re-created and all the books Nephren was reading through, he felt it was more adequate to describe it as a jigsaw puzzle of the memories of a large number of people. He didn't know if that was logically possible, though.

(...Huh?)

The memories of one wouldn't be enough to create this world. A combination of two or three probably wouldn't be enough, either. But if there were a hundred people, would that work?

Or if the number of people was in the thousands—how about that?

About three thousand people used to live in Gomag. If he could scoop out the memories of all those people, could it re-create a world that was endlessly similar to real life...?

“...No way.”

He thought it was a crazy idea. But at the same time, that train of thought could explain all the different peculiarities of the situation.

For example, the reason all the people here seemed to move according to their own will was because they were once all “prisoners” like Willem and Nephren. They weren't aware of it anymore, which meant they were already a part of the dreamworld. When he thought of it that way, things made sense.

Then that meant this world was huge. Demons typically enticed only individuals into dreams. Even if they did sometimes drag a whole group into corruption at once, there were only so many people they could keep in one

hand. Their extraordinary power would mostly be used to create and keep this world intact.

But then, why?

During his time living in this world, Willem hadn't been able to pinpoint any devilish tricks that were trying to break them and drag them into depravity.

The incidents surrounding the True World seemed to be the key at a glance, but it was too indirect. Instead, he almost got the impression that whoever it was wouldn't dare touch anything in order to keep the world consistent.

Was there any meaning to this?

(Is the enemy's goal to keep the world historically accurate?)

...No, don't get ahead of yourself. Calm down and think.

That guess probably wasn't right. That's because he, Willem Kmetsch, and Nephren were here.

If whoever this was wanted to keep the surface world as it was just before it ended, then there was no point in incorporating these two outsiders into a world that was supposedly already perfect. These two foreign elements existing alone was enough to warp historical fact.

History was already breaking by them meeting people they never should've been able to meet in the first place.

"...Even if it's a dream, even if it's fake, Almaria and everyone are still here, huh?"

"Hmm?"

"Nah. I was just thinking about getting myself together tomorrow to shake up the world a little."

He couldn't determine what the enemy wanted. He didn't even know if they wanted to preserve history or change it. He didn't know, so thinking about it wouldn't help. In that case, then his plan of action should be to get up and start messing with history.

Like how that group from the True World attacked them today, for example. That should be significant somehow. In original history, they would've succeeded in their mission and gotten their hands on Odle's body. But since they weren't able to, their research would be slightly...no, substantially delayed.

In order to break and get out of this world, first, he would have to save it.

That was good enough for now.

It felt like someone was watching him.

He turned around.

There were a ton of people around, likely because the sun was setting on the town. He tried scanning the chaotic throng, but he didn't see anyone looking their way or even an acquaintance.

Had he imagined it?

"Willem?"

"...Yeah, sorry."

It was probably because he was so tense. It was like how the subtle waving of the curtains looked like a terrible monster after watching a horror crystal projection.

It seemed like the peaceful days on Regule Aire, a place so far removed from battle, had stolen the veteran Quasi Brave's ability to keep his presence of mind on the battlefield.

"It's getting cold. Let's head back."

"Okay."

The winter sun set early.

The two melded into the crowd of people rushing home and quickly made their way back to the orphanage.

5. The Girl with Crimson Hair

They almost saw her.

The girl pressed her palm onto her loudly pounding chest.

Deep breaths, in and out. Slowly, her pulse steadied.

Still keeping herself hidden in an empty spot, the girl urgently tried to calm her heart.

"What is it? Why did you stop and hide all of a sudden?"

There came a woman's voice from the empty space beside the girl's ear.

The air wavered before the girl's eyes. Like a clear glass being filled with drink, a flying fish with vermilion scales swirled into view before her.

The silent voice of the sky fish whispered to the girl.

"...The boy you were just looking at seemed a little strange. The color of his soul remained intact. He shouldn't still be connected to his real body."

"...No, he shouldn't..."

"Oh? And why is your face all red? I'd say he was a fine young man. Have you fallen for him?"

"Nuh-uh, I haven't!"

The girl looked straight at the sky fish.

"That was Willie! He shouldn't be here!"

"Will... Ahhh, the second officer that girl met up with in the sky?"

The girl nodded furiously. Her face was as red as a boiled lobster.

"Oh my. Do you know what this means? Do you think the reason why time in this world suddenly started moving again last week was because he just joined us?"

"Probably... I think so..."

"Then, what luck! He's strong, isn't he? He probably wants to get out just as much as we do, so he may help us if we reveal who we are!"

"We can't. He probably hates me."

She clenched her fists.

"He would be so upset if he found out who I am."

"...You sure are creating quite the troublesome relationship for yourself before you've even met him."

The sky fish's tail fin swayed in vexation.

"But if you say so, then I suppose we'll do it on our own. The date might be a little off, but the day will soon come. When that happens, you should find where you are in this world and release her."

The sky fish twirled in the air and vanished back into space.

"Okay," the girl answered as she slowly poked her head out from the alleyway.

She tried finding the young man among the evening crowd.

She couldn't find him. He had walked off somewhere a while ago.

"Is he still on your mind?"

"...Not really. He's not that good-looking anyway. I don't have bad taste like Chtholly."

The girl shook her head and slipped back into the alley.

"A stickler for looks, aren't you?"

The slowly spreading veil of twilight obscured the girl from view.



The First Beast Who
Laments for the Moon
-a piece of cake-

The First Beast Who Laments for the Moon

-a piece of cake-

1. The First

You wanna be a Brave, izzit?

He remembered his master's face when he first brought up the topic with him.

It was a complex expression, one that seemed both happy and sad, both interested and annoyed.

Now that he thought back on it...Willem could understand about half of how he felt. The intricate web of feelings that crossed his heart when Falco at the orphanage said to him, *I'm gonna be a Brave, too!* was probably the same as that.

He was happy that the boy aspired to be like him, the father figure, and wanted to follow in his steps.

He was sad that the bright and shining icon of a hero that existed in his mind would soon be dirtied and shattered.

He was angry because there were so many other paths Falco could take in life— Why did he have to pick the hardest one? But he was also touched by the purity of a young boy chasing his dreams.

You wanna protect the orphanage, izzit?

You an idiot? There are plenty of other ways to keep us safe. Why'd you pick the world's most grueling work?

But in the end, he felt like something was different.

He had a hunch that how his master felt back then was degrees different from how Willem felt now.

Fine, fine. I'll teach you. I'll be your master.

But listen—I ain't got no faith in your talent. I'll be going at full speed from the get-go tryin' to shake you off, so you better hold on tight.

It was tragic how accurate his master's words were.

Willem Kmetsch had no talent, and he barely acquired any of the sword techniques that the former Legal Brave, Nils D. Foreigner, taught him. And the only Carillon he could awaken were the mass-produced ones of the lowest ranks.

And the insolent girl who barged in after him to become another pupil of his had everything he didn't. She mastered all the blade techniques unique to Braves, said to blast away unfairness by force, and even easily awakened the oldest holy sword, said to be the one hardest to please.

You can give up, y'know?

Quit what doesn't suit you and go back to the orphanage.

His master hadn't been overjoyed or angry back then.

He wasn't sad, nor did he pity him.

An emotion Willem didn't recognize brimmed in his eyes as he smiled a gentle, wry smile.



There was a little walking path that stretched along the canals that flowed through the city.

During the day, it was a place for relaxation for the townspeople. There were people taking leisurely walks, people jogging, people touring the canals on little boats, people playing bright melodies on the violin for money, artists with their easels set up trying to capture the sights in a painting—

But when the sun set, every last one of them went home.

Now, where the stars shone brightly above, there was a lone man sitting on a bench gazing up at the moon, taking small sips of his liquor.

“—Been looking for you, Navrutri,” Willem called out, and the man slowly looked toward him.

“Hey, Will... Funny place to see you.”

“You’re the one in a funny place,” he casually replied, sitting next to Navrutri. “Never seen you drunk like this before.”

“Man, I just can’t bring myself to like Imperial liquor. No matter how much I drink, I’m never a happy drunk.”

“You think that’s the alcohol’s fault?”

“It might all be because of me, but it’s still the same. This liquor and I never made a connection, that’s all.”

As he spoke, he took the half-empty glass bottle and tossed it. There came a quiet splash from the darkness in the direction of the canal.

“Littering’ll cost you a fine, y’know.”

“I’ll pay when city hall opens. Men should never be frugal when it comes to partings.”

“Then you better apologize to, like, half of mankind.”

He sighed.

But of course, that wasn’t what he came here to talk about.

“I looked up a bunch of stuff on the True World,” Willem began, gazing blankly out over the black surface of the water. “Putting it roughly, religion is a group of people who share a common sense that has been transformed into culture. No one could trust anyone who doesn’t share common knowledge with them. That’s why it’s easy for people of different faiths to look at one another as absurdities, and the fighting never stops. So to prevent that from happening, all the nations take a shot at establishing a national religion to unify the country’s common sense.”

"Sure." Navrutri nodded slightly, his expression vacant.

"...The followers of the True World all share the common sense that *This world is not what it should be*. That's pretty nonsensical, if you ask me. Someone who thoroughly believes that wouldn't listen to anything else. That's why they're at odds with the people around them. The only ones who understand are the people who share the same teachings. So their ties within the group strengthen. As time goes on, discord with the outside gets worse. Then finally, they start thinking that it's time to rid the world of all the disbelievers and reveal the true world..." Willem sighed briefly. "But that's the wrong idea."

The light in Navrutri's eyes wavered a bit. "Go on."

"To people on the outside, they just look like one big group of weirdos, but from the inside, everyone's different. The True World's not a monolith.

"The idea they share is that *This world is not what it should be*. Beyond that, their schools of thought are split into two: There're people who want to return the world to its original form and people who want to somehow preserve the fake world as it is now. And ninety-seven years ago when the group was first established, the founder supported the latter idea. Basically, the original True World wasn't the kind of organization to carry out any major alterations. Right?"

"It doesn't contradict the information I have, at least. Is that it?"

"Nope. I was just confirming my assumption that there were two groups within their organization. My real question is next."

Willem inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

His eyes trained on the water's surface, he asked his question breezily.

"I'm asking what side you're on, Navrutri."

A long silence.

"How did you notice I was a part of the True World?"

"Aw, you really are? It was just a question to get you to confess."

"...Will?"

"I'm only half joking. Don't make that face. Those guys trying to make off with people in comas had timing that was too perfect. I looked real carefully at the flow of information passing through the Guild. There, I found a record of someone who obtained information through suspicious channels. After following that, your name came up. And that's not all. You said you were suspicious of other Quasi Braves, but there was only you and me here in Gomag, and you weren't showing any signs of leaving. So I thought that meant you knew you didn't need to investigate or be careful of the double-crossing Quasi Brave as of now."

"So you were just a little suspicious. You came to your conclusion based on so little information?"

"That's why I said I was half joking. Half of me was really asking you a leading question."

They heard a quiet *splash*. A fish or something must have leaped from the water.

"And? You didn't think I'd come to seal your lips after I told you what I really was? I think you're aware, but I'm pretty good at assassinations."

"And I think you're aware that I'm pretty good at foiling assassins, too." Willem cackled. "And you said it yourself: It's not my job to doubt my coworkers. Then that means it's not my job to doubt you, True World or not. I highly doubt you're gonna resort to assassination over this."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"That's fine. It makes sense to me."

"And the way you've turned on me is awful." Navrutri shrugged. "...I'm on the side of keeping the world as it is now. We're in sort of an antagonistic relationship behind the scenes with what you call the group that wants major alterations. I can't say much more than that, but do you have any questions?"

He asked, and Willem thought.

There was a lot he wanted to know, of course. But among that, there wasn't much he could ask Navrutri that could be meaningful.

"When you guys say *The world as it should be*, are you talking about the empty gray wasteland with the weird beasts roaming around it?"

"Correct. It's called the landscape of the original world."

"What do the guys who want to alter everything want so badly?"

"Oh, plenty of stuff. Some want to control the beasts and to change everything into barren wastes for the purpose of war, and some just believe that everything should be the way it's supposed to be, unconditionally. To borrow your own words, that's common sense for them."

"Do you think you could stop them?"

"Well..."

Navrutri was about to say something, but he made gestures indicating that he was thinking and closed his mouth.

"Hello?"

"...There's no need. Their main forces were crushed two years ago. The only ones left were underlings of underlings who command few resources. They can't make any actual progress now."

What the hell is he talking about? Willem thought.

They can't make any actual progress? Of course they can. They're causing people to fall into comas right now.

"They can plot all they want; ruin is on the horizon," Navrutri said lightly, the meaning of which was somewhat unclear. "What the emnetwiht race needs now are fragments of the Visitors' souls. Preparations to replace these are underway. We'll make it before the day comes."

"Uh, I don't really get what you're saying. If you're gonna use jargon, then at least explain what it is."

"...Well, it just means we're managing to put up a good fight. I can't say any more than that."

He was brushing him off with a vague smirk.

"Can I trust you?"

"It's not your job to doubt your friends, right?"

When Navrutri said that, Willem somehow found it hard to press the question any further.

"What can I do?"

"The best thing for you would be to just trust me and wait. I know how strong you are, but this isn't something that can be dealt with on strength alone— Oh no, wait."

Navrutri suddenly shook his head, as though he'd remembered something important.

"There was one thing I wanted to ask you. Do you know where Mr. Nils is?"

"My damn teacher?"

That was a strange and sudden thing to ask.

"Last I heard of him, he went to the capital a while back. He'll probably pop back in at the worst time, though. What about him?"

"Nah, that's fine if you don't know. Tell me right away if he comes back," Navrutri said, standing up, as though telling him that was all they had time to talk about. "He should know a way to save the world from its end."

2. The Adventurers from the Guild

Rumor spread through the Gomag City Hospital.

People apparently heard singing at night in the special ward.

Some said it was a male voice, others said female; some said it was a child's voice and some an elder; some said it was a love song, and some said it was one that longs for home—every night, this indeterminate sound echoed from out of nowhere.

There were, of course, some who thought it was one of the inpatients singing. But the only ones staying in the special ward at the moment were five men and women who had fallen into comas, cause unknown. And since there was an unknown armed group targeting them, there was strict security day and night. There was no room for outsiders to sneak in.

In that case, there was only one possibility.

The slumbering patients, seduced by dreams of the gray world, were the ones singing. Through their nostalgic yet nauseating melody, they were trying to drag those around them into the same dreamworld...

"Will you stop with that?!"

Luzie shivered lightly.

"I'm supposed to help with security tonight, you know! What am I supposed to do if I see something I'm not supposed to see?!"

"Oh, I just had to, because I really wanted to see how you'd react."

Ted beamed, and then he flipped over when a clenched fist made contact with the tip of his nose.

"You're gonna be in a world of hurt one day if you keep teasing girls so tastelessly like that."

"...And you didn't count that as *a world of hurt*, so I really don't know what to think of you as a girl." A sharp glare. "Just kidding."

Sure, hospitals always came with ghost stories.

The day after a strong wind, the outpatients somehow concocted a tale of an ill-fated girl who died as she dreamed of her betrothed, and they whispered among themselves as if it were true. The day after the curtains on the second floor were changed to white, the legend of a mystery man in a white cape who hated the living was born, and it captured the hearts of the children.

That's why they probably didn't need to think so hard about it.

The song might actually have just been the sound of the wind blowing through the windows, or the meowing of a stray cat in the area, or they just happened to hear the humming of someone who was in such a good mood, they couldn't help humming from a house far away. There was nothing odd about it at all.

And yet, scary things were still scary.

"Ohhh... Maybe I should bring some earplugs..."

"You're supposed to be on guard, so you really should be keeping a sharp ear out."

"And who do you think's putting me on edge like this?!"

In the corner of the Adventurers Guild, the two sat at a table, throwing back glasses of cheap cider.

The investigation on the comas hadn't advanced much since then. The number of people succumbing to it was increasing bit by bit. There was no common thread between age or sex, and they didn't find any particular clue among their personal histories and daily habits.

There was still no information on the True World's base of operations. Gomag was a small town of only about three thousand people—where would they hide? Or maybe their base wasn't here in the first place.

And the group that attacked first had stayed silent. The use of arcane arts related to torture was outlawed by international charter, so as long as they kept their mouths shut, there was nothing they could do.

Ever since the first attack, everyone was ready for the possibility that similar attacks would keep happening as long as people kept falling comatose. The fact that their caution amounted to nothing in the end should probably be a good clue for what was to come.

It didn't seem too dangerous for Adventurers to handle anymore... So they hadn't worked with that Quasi Brave boy in a while. He seemed pretty busy carrying out his own personal investigation, and the number of times he even popped into the Guild was less and less.

They hadn't seen him in a while.

"...Hey, can I ask about Willem?"

"Sure."

"He's not married, is he?"

"Well, he's like the orphanage manager in practice, so it's sort of like he has a bunch of children."

Hmm. Kids, Luzie thought as she swallowed a mouthful of the cider. She didn't like children much.

"Oh, but it does seem he's close with many other women. There are so many incredible names on that list."

"Huh, like who?"

"The Legal Brave Lillia Asplay is like his younger co-apprentice."

She choked. The cider entered her windpipe.

"And if we're talking about names we Adventurers are familiar with, there's Emissa Hodwin and Kaya Kaltran, who he's fought alongside several times in the past on the same battlegrounds."

"Whoa, all of them are people over level 30?!"

Adventurers had a grasp on one another's rough fighting prowess through numbers they called levels. So those whose levels were absurdly high were also naturally famous.

"I've heard Willem's own level was over 30 when he had it measured."

"...Oof."

Sure, that made sense.

The one time she saw him fight, it was, to put it simply, overwhelming.

"...So what does he himself think of this? Who's the winner, then?!"

"I hear he found someone really great a little while ago and proposed to her."

Bummer. Luzie's forehead smacked the table.

"I didn't ask who it was exactly, but it sounded like it was someone I don't know."

"Huh... I better give up, then..."

"Personally, I can't really advise you to go after him. If word got out you had a man, this Guild would become a bloodbath, Ms. Luzie."

Ted whirled around.

At the same time, there were about ten men listening in on the conversation who all sat back in their seats and opened their books or threw back another drink or pretended to look out the window.

"I don't mind, since my heart is after Allie's, but you know there are a lot of people pursuing you, right? What would happen if they all ended up in tears?"

Why do I care? she thought.

If they weren't taking any strategies to approach the women they were pining for, then it was hard to say they were after her in the first place. At that point, it was nothing more than a longing. They had no plans of trying to get her in reality and only dreamed about how nice it would be.

So sooner or later, they would all cry. The only difference was if that was going to be a year from now or right now.

"Then what are you telling me to do about how badly *I* wanna cry?"

"Go all in during work and forget about it. I think that'd be best."

"Work..."

The cuckoo clock on the wall made a cartoonish-sounding *cuck-oo, cuck-oo*.

The time of the guard shift change at the city hospital was drawing near.

“...Waaaaah!”

Luzie buried her head in the table.

“It’s all right. Ghosts aren’t real.”

“If something happens to me, the first thing I’m gonna do is curse you...!”

“Nothing will happen! What I told you was just a rumor. Come on— get up and go to work!”

“Nooooooo, I hate scary thiiiiiiings; I’m going hoooooome!”

3. For Someone’s Sake

Almaria got sick.

“...I need to get dinner ready.”

“Go to bed.”

The girl got up and tried to start her housework, but Willem pushed her back onto the bed.

“Nanette’s in the kitchen taking care of dinner right now.”

“I’m worried about her on her own.”

“She’s always helping you out with your work, right? She’ll be fine. Ren’s with her, so there’s no worry about fire or sharp objects.”

He, of course, couldn’t say *I’m more worried about how it’ll taste*. He stayed silent.

“But—”

“You need to rest sometimes. Your body’s not that tough in the first place, remember?”

“Yeah... I know.”

It didn’t seem like she was really conceding the fact, but Almaria still swallowed what she was going to say and obediently placed her head on the pillow.

“This brings back memories.”

“Of what?”

“When I was sick and you stayed by my side.”

“Yeah?”

He went back through his memories. He sure didn’t remember doing this recently.

“Hey, could you spoil me from time to time?”

“Hmm?”

“If I tell you not to go again, will you hold my hand?”

That’s an unusual thing to ask, Willem thought.

Almaria was generally strong of heart. She never whined, never showed her suffering, and never revealed herself to others when she was in low spirits. So for her to say something like that caught him by surprise.

“You want me to?”

“Yeah. It just feels like I should now.”

Almaria's hand rustled and peeked out from under the covers.

He sighed lightly and grasped it with one hand.

"We can't show the other kids this."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, Falco would probably start copying you right away."

"Man... I really wish I could figure out if he's just putting on a front or simply wants attention."

"He's working hard in his own way, you know. Whenever you're not around, he yells, *I'm gonna be a Brave, too!* and does his very best."

"I see."

The Braves in stories splendidly carried out brilliant actions on a dressed-up battlefield. They defeated the strong and evil enemy and ended up betrothed to beautiful princesses. Any little boy—no, even the little girls dreamed of their way of life.

And he thought those dreams were important.

Because he believed that dreams should stay just that—dreams—and never enter reality. Willem himself was no exception as an innocent young lad. He had dreamed of being a Brave from a young age and chosen that path. Then, it was only just after he made his dreams a reality that he realized it—it wasn't exactly the same.

"—Are you afraid to fall asleep?"

A bitter smile. Her hands were trembling slightly.

"When I think about how I might not wake up anymore, of course."

Rumors of the gray dreams had slowly spread since he first heard of them.

Those who repeatedly dreamed it would eventually be caught in the dreamworld and never wake up. That unnecessary embellishment had eventually attached itself to the rumor.

"But it's a lose-lose situation if that keeps you up, then makes you even sicker."

"That's true. Things like that never go according to plan."

"You're driving yourself mad because you're thinking too much. Forget about it and get some rest."

"Okaaay."

She chuckled softly.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Every day since you came home has been so much fun."

"Yeah?"

"Little Miss Nephren's a cutie, too. She's a good kid."

"Yeah."

"We can't stay like this forever, can we?"

...Of course they couldn't.

They couldn't stay in this world forever. They had to escape somehow, before they were killed by the Beasts who were to appear.

And when that happened, they would have no choice but to leave all the people who lived here behind.

Almaria. Ted. Luzie. Falco. Nanette. Wendel, Maurice, Mineh, Detrov, Horace...

Everyone close to him—and everyone not.

He would abandon them all.

"Well, I'll have to go far away again soon."

He lightly gripped Almaria's hand.

"But I'll be back. I promise."

That was a lie.

"And next time, I'll bring my other junior Braves. I think you'll really get along with some of them."

That was also a lie.

"Don't worry. I've never broken any of my promises, have I?"

It went without saying—it was such an audacious, unbelievably big lie, it almost made him laugh.

He had never come home after being sent off to do battle with the Visitors.

Maybe, in this world, that history had been overwritten and erased. And yet, Willem remembered—he had been unable to keep his promise.

"...Yeah, you're right."

Like a saint absolving a criminal of his sins, Almaria smiled gently.

"Then, don't get your head wrapped up in weird stuff. Get some rest."

"Okay."

This time, Almaria nodded earnestly and closed her eyes.

He slowly released the hand he held in his.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"See you tomorrow."

"—Yeah, good night."

He left the room and closed the door behind him.



In an unexpected turn of events, a delicious scent wafted from the kitchen.

A tasty-looking soup bubbled in the pot.

"I decided to do something simple instead," Nanette said suddenly. She was standing on a kitchen step stool meant for shorter people. *It's all right—it's great how dependable you are.* He patted her on the head.

Then Nephren, who was skillfully cutting the hunks of mutton, turned around.

"How was she?"

"She didn't seem that bad, but I put her to bed just in case."

"...Are you worried?"

"Of course I am."

"Even if this is just a dream?"

"Even if this's just a dream," he answered readily.

"Okay." Nephren turned back to the mutton. "I think that's fine, too. It's not like you to look for reasons not to help her. But..."

"...But what?"

"I'm sorry if I made you fret."

"Idiot."

He laughed contemptuously, waved his hand lightly, then left the kitchen.

"Lovers' quarrel?" he heard Nanette ask him. Who on earth taught her that term?

"When it's finished, go bring some to Al. She's probably hungry."

"Okaaay!"

Her tone was childlike, her response energetic.

Even when the soup was finished, Almaria didn't wake.

She seemed to be sleeping well, so they let her sleep.

The next morning arrived.

Even when it was time for breakfast, Almaria didn't wake.

Even when they called for her.

Even when they shook her.

Even when they tapped her cheeks.

Even when they called her name.

Her eyes never opened again.

4. A Nostalgic Song

"Oh yeah, have you heard the rumors about that singing voice?"

Gomag City Hospital, the night watch room. A doctor wearing a worn-out lab coat roughly shuffled the cards in his hands as he tilted his head.

"I've heard a bit of it. There was something real nostalgic about that song. It felt like I was hearing something that was really popular a long time ago for the first time in a while."

"Then it's definitely someone from the neighborhood humming. Lot of 'em are the same generation as you."

The other doctor flung a card onto the table.

"I'm not a big fan of how ghost stories are so common around patients who are alive but don't wake up... Chariot on top."

"It's not really a ghost story yet. I'll put two Cavalry on top of that."

"Yet means it's only a matter of time before it is. A Noble and an Attendant."

The stack of cards on the table was growing.

One doctor grimaced and grumbled "Damn" as he tossed out a coin.

"You think the patients'll ever get better?"

"Can't really say. There's a lot about this whole situation that's strange. Comatose patients typically become enervated after a few days, and they get dirtied with grime and whatnot. But none of these patients are showing any signs of that."

Something suddenly came to mind.

"...The Adventurers for the patrol are real late, aren't they?"

This ward was under heavy security in anticipation of attacks by the armed group. The Adventurers periodically made their rounds of the area and popped into this night watch room about every thirty minutes or so.

He glanced at the clock. The last time the Adventurers had popped in was almost an hour ago.

"Who cares? They probably shat themselves. Come on, next game."

"Well if they have diarrhea, then we at least have some medici—"

"Just hurry up and deal already. I'm not gonna let you get away with that win!"

Just as one of the doctors was about to get out of his chair, he sat back down with a sigh.

Meanwhile:

A handful of Adventurers, including one woman clad in red-leather armor, were collapsed facedown in the darkness, where the light of the moon or any fire could not reach.

None were visibly injured.

And yet, they all were knocked out cold.

Elsewhere:

The intruders, wearing dark cloaks to blend in with the darkness, silently snuck into the ward.

Wait.

Using lip movements and hand signals, without making a single sound, one of the intruders stopped the others.

It's possible there might be several people hiding here.

What makes you think that?

I can hear singing.

The men strained to listen.

I hear it. But I doubt this will hinder our mission.

Agreed. We don't have much time; let's hurry.

The first man thought for a brief moment, then nodded shortly.

They rushed in the darkness, undid the lock on one of the patient room's doors, slipped inside, neared the bed, and identified the face of the sleeping middle-aged man.

This is it—our first target, Odle N. Gracis.

He pulled out a large black body bag and spread it out.

They lifted the man, who could not struggle against them, and just as they were about to shove him into the bag—

Odle opened his eyes.

"Huh?"

A sudden sound of bewilderment.

There was a loud clatter as Odle was thrown onto the floor.

What are you doing?!

Perceiving the occurrence of an unusual situation, the men assumed defensive stances. The man who had tried to pick Odle up crumpled to the floor before their eyes.

In the darkness, they could see a black-red liquid spreading across the floor.

Moments later, the smell of rust began to fill the air.

“.....”

Odle stood from the floor.

His eyes were bloodshot. His mouth was open as wide as it could go, wringing out a voiceless noise from his throat.

Is he...singing?

Odle’s body slowly rocked side to side.

This was an unexpected development, but the intruders did not move.

Noises intertwined with what was supposed to be a silent mission. But that didn’t mean anyone had noticed yet.

Their target, who was supposed to be in a coma, had put up a little resistance, but that didn’t mean what they were supposed to do had changed. They would just have to take slightly rougher measures. That was all. But—

“.....”

The attackers saw it.

Without any context, a strange sight appeared in their minds’ eyes—no, it spread before them and blanketed their entire vision.

It was the gray desert.

A world without any people, without any man-made structures—just the passage of day and night, a constant cycle of the sun and the moon.

And they felt an indescribable longing for what should have been an uncanny sight. A terrible homesickness clenched around their hearts. They couldn’t understand why.

“Wha...?”

In their confusion, they were too late to notice.

They couldn’t move.

Their legs stayed still. Their arms were frozen. Their tongues stuck in place.

They couldn’t even brush Odle’s arms away as he drew closer to them, much less pin him down. They couldn’t even scream.

Odle sang a voiceless song.

With quiet *thuds*, the intruders collapsed to the floor.

The black-red substance spread, soiling the sanitized floors.

5. The Night of the End, the Night of the Beginning

I’ll go see Navrutri, Willem thought.

He’d ask if they really managed to prevent destruction. If they could really keep the world as it was. If they found a way to wake up the comatose victims.

He went out into town, and as he took the path toward the Guild, he remembered he didn't know where Navrutri was staying in the first place. He could probably find him if he looked, but that would take time. Willem wasn't relaxed enough now to take his time doing something like that.

Was he based at the True World laboratory?

If he was, then finding him would be hard. Gomag wasn't a big city, but the Adventurers hadn't found anything that could be it in their investigations up to that point. Either it was cleverly camouflaged, or it was hidden deep underground.

Underground.

Oh, right. He'd totally forgotten.

There was a place like that, wasn't there? There was a mysterious underground facility that sprawled beneath the feet of the people of Gomag, who were none the wiser. He knew about it and its general location. That didn't mean the facility and the True World were 100 percent connected, but that was all. It should be worth pursuing.

...This wasn't reality.

This was a prison for his spirit. An arbitrary dreamworld.

The fact that it looked like reality—and the fact that *things* that looked like people from the real world were there and breathing—was all so it could carry out its role as a prison.

So everything here was worthless. No—he *shouldn't* try to find worth in them. All that would do was essentially lessen his will to return to reality and create the risk that he would be trapped in this prison forever.

When they escaped back to reality, this world would disappear anyway.

So what should he care what happens to this world?

(I thought I'd accepted all this from the start, though.)

None of the children at the orphanage were real.

He would have to abandon them all soon anyway.

So it didn't matter when or where they would die. It was all so insignificant, he could just laugh it off.

He'd told himself that over and over.

But he couldn't.

Real or not, what did it matter? That was Almaria.

She called me "Dad."

She asked me to stay with her.

She smiled at me. Cried to me. Got mad at me, annoyed with me. Pouted to me. Leaned on me. I got to see her face again, hear her voice again, and I never thought I would get the chance.

Of course, he didn't want to lose her.

"Willem."

He heard his name and snapped back to reality.

He looked down and noticed for the first time that Nephren was right by his side.

He had been so concentrated on one thing, he noticed her only now.

He thought it was exceptionally cold when he noticed sparse flurries falling from the sky.

"...Sorry. Did I have a scary look on my face?"

He breathed in deeply, then breathed out.

"You did, but that's not it."

That was an odd thing for her to say.

"Something's strange."

When she mentioned it, he looked around them.

Everything seemed to be in order. They were on a street on a gentle slope, and various narrow staircases connected to the street. He could smell the faint scent of spice, characteristic of the town in the evening. Not many people were out, and those who should've been rushing home—

For some reason, several of these people were stopped on the roadside, stock-still.

They were all looking in different directions—some to the sky, some to the ground, some straight ahead. But they all looked on with unfocused eyes.

"...No."

He rushed to one person near them, a young woman who seemed to have been on her way home from shopping. She stood in place, her shopping basket filled with meat and vegetables still hanging from her arm. It didn't quite seem like she was unconscious. It was almost as if she was just spaced out, lost in thought.

He called to her. He waved his hand in front of her face. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. Nothing produced a reaction.

Her lips were moving slightly, like she was whispering. Or like she was singing. But even when he stood still to listen, he didn't hear anything.

"Ren."

"Okay."

He only briefly called out her name, and Nephren, understanding his orders, was already on the move. She neared the few people they could see and checked on them one by one.

As she did that, Willem quickly activated his venenum. Leaving a deep footprint in the firm ground, he leaped high up into the air. He reached a height several times higher than the houses around them, looked over the area, then came back down.

(This...)

He saw fires in several parts of the city.

He could faintly hear the voices of confusion and chaos carried on the wind.

"No, don't tell me... It's started already?"

This was a very bad situation. The state of things had already spread far. And it seemed like the incident was progressing at the same rate everywhere.

“Willem.” Nephren rushed back to him. “Everyone who’s frozen still is the same. They don’t respond to anything. The people moving are normal, but they’re starting to notice.”

From what they could see, just under a fifth of the people around them were in a trance. But the peculiarity of that fifth suddenly coming to a halt was beginning to rob the calm from the remaining four-fifths—

“Is this like a rapidly spreading poison or something?”

(No. This runs far deeper than that.)

The one faction within the True World, the one that Navrutri was opposing, had probably just completed the technology that could broadcast an enchantment over a wide area... It was likely, but something was off.

It was hard to explain, but it felt abrupt, like the sight before him was unnatural. It was almost like a day that was supposed to continue uneventfully as normal had suddenly been overwritten by the happening before him—

“Let’s get back to the orphanage for now. I’m worried about Almaria—”

There was a pained cry, one that sounded like all the air was being squeezed out of someone’s lungs.

He turned around.

The woman from earlier was moving.

A man had approached her, probably her family, and she had bitten deep into his shoulder. Blood flowed from the wound. Her natural teeth couldn’t withstand the strength of her jaw muscles as she tried to rip into his flesh. One by one, her teeth fell from her mouth.

Desperate, the man shoved the woman backward. She staggered and lost her balance, crumpling to the ground. Then, slowly, she stood.

In the gaps where her teeth had fallen from her red-soaked mouth, something else was starting to grow in. They gleamed slimily and a blue-purple, like tentacles—

“—Make sure everyone’s still normal, okay, then head for the orphanage!”

Willem yelled and dashed off. As the woman—or what used to be the woman—tried to cover the man’s body again, Willem pressed his hands together and pummeled her in the pit of the stomach from head-on. He put the Bear’s Paw, a move he learned directly from Hilgram, to use. The blow was meant to be powerful enough to blast his opponent backward while keeping their body intact.

“Gah!”

There was something strange about the resistance he felt on his hand. It was heavy and hard, like he had hit a lump of lead.

“Are you okay?!”

Not minding the pain in his wrist, Willem turned back to the man. Blood was flowing gratuitously from the wound in his shoulder, as if a large artery had been severed. He wouldn’t make it if he didn’t quickly stop the blood.

Willem ripped off a piece of his sleeve, and just as he leaned in to sit the man up—

“The song...”

He heard the man murmur.

“I hear...the song...”

His eyes lost their focus, and he gazed into space.

Willem saw that something was off. He leaped away from him.

“I miss...the gray...world...”

This was bad.

The blood from the man’s shoulder was beginning to bubble. Something blue-purple was also trying to grow from inside him. This person was giving up on being a person.

(This can’t be.)

He wasn’t panicked at all.

With surprising calm, Willem accepted what was happening before him.

People were changing into something that wasn’t people. And that was, more than likely, also due to the True World’s handiwork.

Definitive proof of the theory he never wanted to believe was right before his eyes.

“...No.”

He could hear Nephren’s quiet murmur.

“This can’t...be.”

It sounded like she had come to the same conclusion as Willem on her own.

But of course she would. She had spent her whole life fighting its cousins up in the sky. Her whole life was meant to be spent in those battles.

Her eyes would never have been wrong.

She realized what it was right away, and half in disbelief, she called its name.

“—The Piercing One, Beast Number Two, Aurora—?”



Desperatio was a Carillon that specialized in killing kin.

Nopht Keh Desperatio fought with the Seventeen Beasts using a sword that existed solely for emnetwiht to kill other emnetwiht.

And that fact led to one hypothesis: Were the Seventeen Beasts altered emnetwiht themselves?

And now, in a dream that resembled the past, that hypothesis was proven correct.

All that would be left after this was how it was in the future.

The people.

The emnetwiht.

Just as it was told in the legends, they birthed the Beasts, became them, and would destroy the world.



Its whole body was like a string. If it had to be likened to anything, it would be like a giant serpent.

But it wasn't a snake, of course. It didn't have a head or a tail, and its skin was covered in countless dully gleaming thorns instead of scales. They grew and shrank freely, sometimes softening to act like cilia and sometimes sharpening like spears to pierce its prey.

It was one of the Seventeen Beasts who roamed the surface. Of all the frequently encountered Beasts, it was the most often sighted by far, and its danger level was considered to be low. And that reason was clear: It could kill only one person at a time. If a group of three encountered it, it was practically guaranteed that one or two would escape alive... There was no other Beast as tepid as this.

It was Beast Number Two—the Piercing One, Aurora.

On the way, they gathered as many people who seemed unharmed as possible.

It went reasonably well at first; people came to them straightaway when called. Some tried to attack, but their movements lagged, so it wasn't too hard to stop them without getting hurt.

Just as their group reached about twenty, the plan fell apart. One of the yet unharmed ones, a very young boy, grabbed at the person next to him.

Though he had suddenly changed, his physique and strength were still that of a child. They managed to subdue the boy without anyone getting injured. The problem came after that: People feared that the person beside them might suddenly attack, and thus, the group fell apart. They ignored Willem as he tried to keep them in check, and all twenty people scattered to the wind.

When they finally arrived back at the orphanage, no one was there.

Not even Almaria, who should have been sleeping soundly in her bed.

Not even the children, who should have been kept in their rooms.

He called out, but there came no answer; he opened the doors but found no one inside. In just the short time that Willem had been away, they had all vanished.

He touched the mattresses but felt no warmth.

It was almost as if no one had been here to begin with.

He recalled the feeling of unease he had earlier, the illogical changes to reality, like reality was being directly overwritten.

"...Ha-ha."

The energy was sapped from his legs, and it felt like he would collapse on the spot. He placed his hand on the wall and managed to steady himself.

The grounded feeling of reality quickly vanished.

Oh, right. This was always a dream. This was never reality to begin with.

"I hate this dream."

The words tumbled from his throat.

"I knew it. The one who created this dream was a demon after all. Probably an aeshma or a bufas, one of those. They arrange reality in impossible ways to try to break us."

"Willem."

There was Nephren's voice, reproving him.

"...I know. I won't look away from *reality*."

They checked the windows and doors. None looked like it'd been opened. Almaria and the children hadn't left on their own, nor had they suddenly been carried off by intruders. It would be a different story if someone with a skilled hand carefully erased all their traces, but as long as they weren't hiding a kidnapping, there was no reason to go out of their way to do this.

This was, without question, an abnormal situation.

The creator of this dreamworld, who had put its heart and soul into re-creating reality thus far, had finally come to intervene.

The enemy's goal was for them to totally become a part of this world. So before both were killed by the Beasts who appeared, as it happened in history, it would try to overwrite history somehow... His judgment had been on the money.

"If Al here turned into Aurora, too...I don't think I would've minded getting killed by her..."

When they returned to the real world, they would die anyway.

But on the other hand, he didn't like the idea of staying trapped in this dreamworld forever.

Then at least this "dad," who never kept any single promise he made, could fulfill just one—the one he had made at the very beginning... He wouldn't mind dying for a reason like that. It was the perfect way to throw away this cheap life.

"Oh, sorry, Ren. If that happens, then I'd end up leaving you alone, huh?"

"Don't worry. If it did, I would die with you."

Nephren wrapped her fingers lightly around Willem's.

"...And you sound like you're gonna live forever."

He reached out as he always did and ruffled her hair.

And the girl, as she always did, wriggled around with a pout.

Now, let us solve a mystery.

Let us think about what it means for Almaria and the others to disappear when they did.

The answer was certainly connected to the final enemy they would have to face.

Just after Almaria collapsed, the disaster engulfed the city.

The people of Gomag turned into Twos, Auroras.

In reality, it was Sixes, Timeres, who dominated the ruins of Gomag.

This world more than likely contained the memories of most—if not all—of the people of Gomag.

The creator of this world was re-creating history on the basis of these memories.

Willem and Nephren were foreign substances to this re-created world.

And right now, it was working to make both of them total residents of this world.

Hypothesis. Assumption. Conjecture. Intuition.

Everything he'd seen, everything he'd heard, everything he'd felt, everything he'd thought—

He threw it all into the pot in his mind, brought it to a boil, and stirred it.

“—No—”

Just as some kind of answer started to take shape—

The doorbell rang.

Right after, there was a loud pounding on the front door.

“Allie! Everyone! Are you all okay?!”

There came a loud, pained voice.

“Ted...?”

His thoughts were interrupted. He looked up and murmured the name.

(He's okay?)

A feeling that was too hollow to be called joy welled up inside him.

“Falco! Wendel! Horace!”

As he aggressively rang the doorbell, almost breaking it, and slammed his hands on the door, Ted called out the names of the children.

“...We probably shouldn't just ignore him, huh?”

“Yes.”

The two left the room, smiling bitterly.

“Mineh! Detrov! Maurice! Nanette!”

...Is he planning on leaving my name for last?

Willem wondered that as he undid the lock and opened the door.

Ted, who had been putting nearly all his weight on the door as he knocked, fell forward a bit.

“...Willem! I'm glad to see you're all right!”

“Yeah, I am. As of right now, I'm fine.”

He probably had to go through hell to get here. Ted's face was so pale, he looked like he would faint any second.

“Where are Allie and the others? Things haven't gotten weird here, have they?”

“—Nah. They haven't gone crazy or anything, at least.”

He nodded vaguely.

“What a relief...”

Ted wavered and almost fell to the floor, but Willem caught his arm and held him up.

“We can't stand here and chat. You look tired. Come in—I'll make tea or something.”

"Oh, I'm sorry. I have some things for you first."

Even though he looked like he could barely stand on his own, Ted forced a smile as he held out a large package he had been carrying on his back.

It was a massive two-handed sword, kept inside a large leather scabbard.

"A Carillon...?"

"This is a lower-ranking one that people even without Brave aptitude can use. I just borrowed one of the ones the Guild had in their safekeeping. I thought you could make good use of this."

That meant he went all the way to the Guild once before running all the way to the orphanage.

"Is the Guild—are the Adventurers okay? What about Luzie?!" Willem couldn't stop asking questions.

"...And one more thing. Well, person."

Ted didn't answer, glancing back over his shoulder.

There was a girl.

She seemed to be fifteen or sixteen. Judging by the traveling clothes she wore, she was probably just passing through.

Her long vivid-crimson hair was braided loosely and spilled down her back. Her eyes, the same color as her hair, showed she was somehow uncomfortable, and she gazed down at her feet.

Zzzt. A strange sense of déjà vu tickled a deep part of his consciousness.

It felt like he'd seen her...no, like he'd met her somewhere before. But he couldn't remember exactly where that could've been.

"I saw her on the street over there. There were plenty of others, but I only managed to bring one person this far."

"Bring this far? You—"

"Please help her. This is the only safe place I can think of anymore."

Ted bowed his head.

"...Fine, fine. I get it. Come inside. I dunno if you're aware, but you look like you're about to pass out cold."

"No. This is good-bye for me."

He smiled.

"Wait, what are you—?"

"I've been hearing singing deep in my ear for a while now."

His forced smile still plastered on his face, his voice began to waver behind tears.

"Someone in my head's been saying *I want to go home; I want to go home*, over and over. And everything I see is being overlapped by some kind of gray scenery. I don't have much time left."

"Ted..."

"That's why I can't come in. Allie always thought the kind of man I wanted to be was dangerous, didn't she? I decided I'd bear through it until I got her *dad's* permission. I can't stand the thought of my choices being crushed by some stupid dream or song or whatever."

“...Ted, you...”

“And that’s how it is, so I’m sorry.”

He pushed himself up.

Ted put all his strength into his knees to stand, then waved to Willem.

“Good luck with everything else.”

Then he ran off.

He was swallowed up by the twilight and vanished.



The image of Ted leaving was burned into Willem’s eyes.

He’s important, he thought, but it was too late now. Ted chose to go far away and disappear all alone in order to keep Almaria and some girl he didn’t know safe. He must’ve felt hopeless, tired, scared, pained. But his final decision was to uphold his dignity as a man to the very end.

Please help her, Ted had pleaded. Willem thought that was an unreasonable thing to ask. How and what was he supposed to do to truly help someone in a dying world?

Good luck with what?

The guy was only level 8, and there he went, trying to act all tough.

The redheaded girl stared intently at her coffee cup.

More precisely, she was gazing at its contents—the thick brown liquid inside.

“Hmm? Not a fan of coffee, are you?” Willem asked, but she shook her head. Then she returned to staring at the inside of the cup. She seemed hesitant when it came to drinking it.

“Then should I put milk and sugar in for you after all?”

She shook her head again, then steeled herself.

With the face of a soldier who had decided to march into the jaws of death, she lifted the cup, put it to her lips, then tilted it back.

“.....?!”

Her face went bright red.

After she put the cup back on the table, she pressed both her hands onto her mouth and gave a silent scream.

Hah, hah, hah. Like a fish dragged on land, she opened and closed her mouth.

“Looks like it was hot.”

Nephren poured cool milk into a different, smaller cup and held it out to the girl. She hesitated for a moment, weighing pride and reality, before tearing the cup away from Nephren and emptying the contents inside her mouth.

Heee, haaah. She spent a few moments adjusting her breathing.

“...It was hot.”

Yeah, I know.

“It was bitter.”

Yeah, I know that, too. That's why I told you to put milk in it.

"You want another cup, then?"

"...With milk, please."

It looked like she'd totally given up on putting up a front. Embarrassed, the girl hesitantly held out her cup.

She was a weird girl.

She looked to be around fifteen, which meant she was the same age as Chtholly. But just judging by the way she spoke and her movements, she seemed much younger. At most, he could probably even say that Nephren looked older.

She wore traveling clothes, but she didn't have anyone with her. Either she'd been traveling alone, or she got separated from whoever she was with. When he considered the worst possibility of whoever that was turning into a Beast, he figured he shouldn't be so careless in asking.

And her gaze.

When she looked away from her coffee cup, the girl would look up at Willem with big, round, inquiring eyes. Then, when Willem made it obvious he noticed her doing that, she would hurriedly look away.

It wasn't exactly a friendly look.

That being said, he didn't feel any malice from it, either.

If he was to analyze it, he'd say it felt like a mix of six parts curiosity, four parts caution.

"Is there something on my face?" He directed the question to Nephren, but she shook her head.

(...We have met somewhere before, then...)

He recalled all his activities as a Quasi Brave on the surface, but he didn't remember her. He would never forget such a vivid crimson if he saw it before.

(.....)

Crimson hair.

He remembered Chtholly. As she lost bits of her memory, her natural hair color had almost corroded into a bright-red hue.

Though it might've just been the unreliable light from the stove, he thought Chtholly's red hair and the bright scarlet on the girl in front of him seemed very similar. Maybe that's why he got that sense of déjà vu.

"...U-um—" The girl looked up and bravely began to speak. "Willie... You're the real Willem, aren't you?"

"Hmm? Uh, yeah, guess I am," he answered, perplexed when she suddenly called his name. "Well, I'm not famous enough to have an impostor walking around... You know me from before, right?"

The girl nodded.

"Ahhh, you heard about me from Ted, didn't you?"

The girl shook her head.

"I saw you in a dream. It was a little short, but it was...I guess a sweet and sugary dream."

“...Uh?”

The heck is that? Some kind of new pickup line?

He always heard that love was born between two people in extreme situations of life and death. And the situation right now was the most extreme of them all.

But this girl seemed way too young, so Willem didn't feel like he could manage those kinds of feelings even if he tried.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember Lillia?”

Of course—Lillia Asplay, the Legal Brave, was much more famous than Willem. It wasn't particularly odd for everyone to know her name.

But for her name to be brought up now, along with the verb *remember*, certainly brought a feeling of unease.

“Well, um,” he answered vaguely. “Why d’you ask?”

“Because she’s important to me,” she answered idly. “I’ve always wanted to be like Lillia. She’s so strong—a good head on her shoulders—and so amazing.”

That painted a rather exaggerated image. He held back his urge to laugh.

The Legal Brave, the strongest soldier of all the emnetwiht, was like an emblem on the front lines in the wars with other races. So the Church did nothing but romanticize and beautify her when they reported on her. She was so overwhelmingly powerful, she could defeat a dragon in one hit. She was so kind and virtuous that she could never leave the weak behind. The way she looked in full armor was so beautiful, boggards groveled before her the moment they were exposed to her power. And on and on...

It was all just silly.

It took her almost half a day after all was said and done to defeat a rust dragon; she wasn't so weak-willed to forget about the priority order for situation assessment when there was a weakened individual before her; when she tried on the full-plate armor the Church sent her, she yelled, “It’s too tight!” and sent it right back.

Lillia, as Willem knew her, was broad-minded and wild and did things her own way and, above all, was always free.

“And in the true sense of the word, she was brave.”

As Willem went back through his memories, the girl continued to sing praises of Lillia.

“She had someone she loved very much, but she hid her feelings. She gave up on making herself happy in order to make him happy. She knew she would *go* in battle, but she went off to fight without hesitation. So this is what the emnetwiht are like... That’s what I learned from watching Lillia.”

“That’s a wonderful lesson.”

There was a strange way of wording things mixed in there. Had she met Lillia herself somewhere, then had fun talking about romance or something?

Talking about romance with Lillia? Oh man. That image did *not* fit her at all, and it almost made him burst out into laughter.

"I wanted to be like her. That was my final dream. I think after I die and scatter to pieces, my feelings will still remain, just a little—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh—"

As though she'd suddenly been brought back to earth, the girl lifted her drooping head.

"It's nothing. It's nothing, so please forget about it. But remember just a bit of it."

What? Which was it supposed to be?

"...Who are you?" Nephren asked quietly. "For some reason, I feel restless when I look at you. It's a weird feeling."

"...You're probably imagining it. Please don't think too hard about it."

She gulped down her drink, which was 70 percent milk and practically a latte at that point, and sighed.

"Calm now?"

"Yeah."

She nodded honestly.

"All right. Sorry, but can you watch the place for me for a little while?"

"Huh?"

She looked at him blankly.

"We've gotta go out for a bit."

He exchanged a brief glance with Nephren.

"In the meantime, I wanna leave this run-down orphanage in your hands. Can I count on you for that?"

"Where are you going?"

"There's someone I gotta see. I'm gonna bust right in and flip his whole playground inside out while I'm at it."

"Then I'm going, too."

"You can't—it's dangerous. It's safe here— Well, I can't guarantee that, but it's better than anywhere else. That damn kid asked me to take care of you, so I can't put you in harm's way."

The girl groaned quietly.

"Will you come back? Can you promise?"

—*That's...*

After this, they were going to confront the very one who created this world. As a result, this world would either break or be torn apart by battle—either way, they probably wouldn't come back here. So even if he made the promise, he would never be able to keep it.

"Sorry. I can't."

It was only his word anyway—he should just say he would... But he couldn't do it. He couldn't repeat the same lie in this orphanage again.

He grabbed the Carillon leaning against the wall by the hilt and tossed it to Nephren—Dindrane, a mass-produced Carillon. It was much lower in

class than her compatible blade, Insania, but it boasted high, well-rounded abilities. It was rated favorably among the average Quasi Braves who couldn't wield swords of higher status—the masterpiece of the Imperial Workshop.

"Should I take this?"

"I can fight a little without any weapons, but you need something to fight with, yeah?"

He nodded lightly when Nephren looked up to him to ask.

"We're off."

They turned their backs to the girl.



"—There was plenty more you wanted to talk about, no?"

The sky fish appeared out of thin air, curling around the crimson girl.

"You finally got to meet him. Weren't you going to coax him or court him?"

"No."

The girl shook her head.

"I'm not the one who likes Willie. I don't like people who are that unattractive."

"You're so stubborn... Well, I suppose we'll set that aside for now." The sky fish twirled around the girl. "Shouldn't you have gone along with them, even if that meant revealing who you are? Our goal is essentially the same as theirs. I believe our chances of success will increase if we work together honestly."

"....."

"Even if you insist that he hates you. He's not the type to forget his priorities, no? I believe we had plenty of chances to create a united front."

"I think you're right."

"Then why?"

"I...don't know." As she spoke, the girl turned to the window and looked to where Willem and Nephren ran off to. "Because when he told me I couldn't go with him, I felt almost...happy, a little."

"Sigh... I see what you mean."

"What? ...Did you learn something?"

"No. I simply thought how much that sounded like you," the sky fish spoke, as though somewhat vexed, before a thought came to it. "Oh, right. How was your first black coffee?" it asked.

"It was hot" was her answer.



Nephren sprouted her phantasmal wings and flew through the sky.

Willem used his venenum to strengthen his legs and leaped from roof to roof.

The two dashed through the city as they gazed down at the hordes of Aurora milling about the streets below.

"It wasn't a demon who created this world. It was a Beast."

With every step Willem made, pieces of roof tile went flying.

"And that Beast didn't exist in this world until just a little while ago. It was living as a person here before it turned into a Beast. That's why it never played with the world to approach us directly, and that's why we never found it after all that looking. But the day's come in this world, too. The broadcasted curses birthed the Beasts. The creator started functioning. That's why, at that moment, the creator started manipulating this world. Almaria was moved because the creator deemed that necessary."

From all parts of the city below them, he could hear cries both loud and quiet.

There were people still alive. Soon, there would be no one.

"...I don't really understand."

I don't blame you, he thought.

Because even Willem himself didn't completely comprehend the situation.

All he did was put what he thought sounded right into words. It wasn't logical, and he wasn't certain.

"Well, don't worry too much about it. What's more important is that this world is reenacting what happened in our world five hundred years ago relatively faithfully. At the very end of the line, that's where our world will be. There should be something in this world that's stuck around for five hundred years that's in our world, too."

Willem reached the top of the church steeple and leaped up to it to look down at the central square. He stopped and asked, "Here?"

Nephren landed beside him. "Yeah. The coordinates should be around here."

"I don't see anything that stands out."

They could see a few deformed monsters like ants in the square below.

"It wouldn't be in those Twos down there, would it?"

"Of course not," he replied casually, clenching his fist...and just as he did, he noticed something off.

His body was creaking slightly.

He knew this pain well.

(...Guess the dream's almost over.)

In reality, his body was not much more than a corpse that wasn't entirely dead yet. His bones were littered with cracks and his tendons were weak and his organs often didn't work right and his flesh was broken. Just by kindling all the venenum he could, his whole life force would be sapped dry.

His body was now beginning to catch up to reality.

(But for now, I think I can still move for a while.)

He adjusted his breathing and clenched his fist again.

"Come with me."

That was all he said to Nephren before taking the leap.

On the way down, he kicked off the church's bell tower to pick up speed. He raced downward—much quicker than he would be if he was falling naturally—straight toward the middle of the square. Nearby was a small fountain that had been out of service for a while due to lack of maintenance.

He struck his fist into the earth.

It arbitrarily brought together the flow of every power, from rotation and spin and flow and pause to the inevitable reactionary forces that returned to the fist upon impact. It was not counted as a technique to be used against other people yet not even treated as a proper fist technique—a most wicked siege dance.

Dragon festering. It was an absurd technique, only ever used to split the earth or shatter waterfalls, a display of such destructive forces. That was the very kind of might he needed at the moment.

Kala-kalaaang. From the impact of the kick, the bell rang wildly.

And just moments after that, the flagstone in the spacious square cracked and shattered, collapsing below.

Of course it did.

Five hundred years in the future, they'd found a large and mysterious facility that sprawled beneath the ground of what was once the city of Gomag. The very place that Glick had led him and Chtholly to. No one knew of it until the investigation team from Regule Aire had discovered it, which meant it had always escaped the eye of the Adventurers Guild—Gomag's last uncharted territory.

(...Rgh—)

Dragon festering in an undeveloped body couldn't completely control the tempestuous flow of energy, and recoil stayed in his fist. Skin violently ripped from his right hand. His bones were in a terrible state as well.

But he could still move.

"This way!"

Leaving to Nephren the Auroras that closed in on them, Willem leaped into the darkness below.



There were several problems that inevitably came with underground structures.

One was lighting, and the other was ventilation. Fire was necessary for people to do things underground, where they couldn't use the sunlight. However, it became harder to breathe the more fire they used. Large ventilation windows were necessary in order to take in fresh air. And so, hidden underground facilities were usually not very practical.

(Things would've been just a little better if this was Regule Aire, because of illumination crystals...)

Even inconsequential thoughts like that crossed his mind.

To put it simply, it was dark.

Willem didn't know any useful skills like Dark Vision or lighting thaumaturgy. He didn't even have the know-how of exploring these underground mazes. He got this far by breaking in through sheer force, but shamefully, he couldn't go any farther than that.

Nephren lightly kindled her venenum and used the force to wake Dindrane. Cracks appeared on the blade, a faint light pouring out from it.

"Should I make it stronger?"

"No, that's good enough."

They were using the Carillon, a beacon of hope for mankind's salvation, as a torch.

They should've brought a real torch, but he hadn't paid any mind to details like that. If Glick were here, he would most certainly be laughing at him.

In the darkness, they opened a nearby door and looked through it as the faint light illuminated the space.

It was a dirty room. The desk and shelves and floor were filled with haphazard stacks of paper. They had an overwhelming presence, as though these studies and reports and scribbled notes were all proudly stating that they were the rulers of this space.

Some kind of resource room, eh? Willem wondered as he looked for another door for them to keep going. Nothing.

It was times like these when he thought about forcing their way forward by just punching through the walls or the floor. An Aurora could attack them from the darkness from anywhere at any time anyhow. Though it was risky to force a shortcut, since his right hand hurt so much, it was worth trying.

"...Is this," Nephren murmured, picking up a sheet of notes, "research material?"

"Probably how to put together the curse to change emnetwiht into Beasts."

"Hmm, that doesn't seem right."

Nephren's response sounded doubtful, so he peeked at the notes in her hand. Wow, the writing was terrible.

"...What are the Visitors?"

What?

The Visitors were the Visitors, of course. The ones who created this world in the first place.

They were the ones who created the world out of nothing a long time ago. They filled the planet with nature, poured water into the oceans, birthed the emnetwiht and other beings, and gave the world its shape. In

the process of it all, they shared their souls with the emnetwiht, and they then disappeared.

Just the other day, one of the last living Visitors awoke and, along with its underlings, the Poteau, for some reason turned against the emnetwiht race. Though it came with the heavy cost of many sacrificed lives, they somehow managed to fight them back, and here they were now.

"They didn't create the world. They just remade it."

Huh. That so?

Of course a religious organization would write something like that. He didn't think they were developing theological arguments like that, even in the notes being thrown out by research organizations.

"The world was already here before they visited, and lives that could not be called life existed here. They were not what the Visitors wished for, however. That's why they cursed the world and everything on it—"

Wait, hold on a second. I've never heard of this before.

"...Willem?"

"Never mind." He tossed away the notes. "A theologian might be able to pick out some interesting stuff if we showed this to one, but it doesn't have anything to do with us now."

He once again turned his gaze to the paper-filled room—
—and heard the sounds of clashing swords.

"Willem."

"Yeah, I heard it."

It wasn't that far from them. He could tell exactly where it was coming from. Someone would be there, at least. Or *something*.

In the darkness, they fled the room and ran.

Nephren spread her wings out wide, giving them just enough light to run down the hall.

Signs that read NO GRAFFITI! were plastered here and there along the walls.

And weaving through the gaps of these signs were scribbles of mathematical and spell formulas and sentences filling the white walls.

The emnetwiht have multiplied too much! The first spell approaches its limit!

They should never have brought the emnetwiht race into existence.

The production of the emnetwiht was the Visitors' first and greatest sin.

They raced down the corridor, the words passing into their vision.

O Visitors, why did you create us emnetwiht?

What has your homesickness wrought on us; what has it taken from us?!

Sprawling, messy writing cried out along the walls.



There was a mountain of Aurora corpses, all cut up into tiny pieces.

And sitting beside that, leaning against the wall, was Navrutri.

“...Hey.”

He must’ve noticed the approaching light. He weakly lifted his head.

His usual cheery grin had lost its spirit.

“I wondered who was coming this way, and it was you, Will. How’d you find this place?”

His body from the chest down was stained a bright red. Almost half the flesh on his stomach was mixed with countless needles and had become a messy red mass.

No matter how Willem looked at it, he didn’t have much time left.

It was probably the work of his Carillon, Lapidemsibilus, that was keeping him conscious. Among the high-ranking Carillon, each manifested its own unique talents. This sword created a phenomenon that forcibly regulated the user’s mental and physical conditions while it was active.

But that didn’t mean it would close open wounds or stop outpouring blood. Lapidemsibilus’s power could not prevent the inevitable arrival of death.

“The old curse was fading. We had to curse the people again. But we couldn’t. Even when we obtained the corpse of the gods, even when we shattered its soul into thousands of tiny pieces, we couldn’t re-create the Visitors’ curse.”

“Hey... Navrutri...?”

The light from Lapidemsibilus faded.

Navrutri’s kindled venenum was starting to disappear.

“We can’t do it... We need a Foreigner’s wisdom...”

His eyes weren’t looking at Willem anymore. They were fixed in place, gazing off far into the distance.

“But...we don’t...have tim...”

His outstretched hand abruptly fell.

His bearded visage, which always wore a teasing grin, was frozen, contorted in pain and anguish.

“Sheesh. The hell are you talking about all of a sudden? I don’t get it.”

Unable to control his emotions, insults began hurling from Willem’s mouth.

“Why’d you die? Why’d you fail? If you’re gonna save us, then carry through with it, damn it! You’re a Brave! That’s your job; that’s your duty!”

“Willem.”

He clenched his fist.

He was seriously thinking about giving him one good punch.

But he didn’t. What he did next couldn’t be described exactly as *instead of*, but he picked up Lapidemsibilus, which lay on the ground near them.

“It doesn’t matter anymore how your fight turned out. That ended a long time ago, and it’s not like we can overturn that outcome. But—”

He activated his venenum.

A high-ranking Carillon like Lapidemsibilus would never accept Willem. Faint cracks appeared on the blade, and light poured from the inside, but

that was all. Right now, it was nothing more than a big, glowing knife. It could not demonstrate its true value as a Carillon, created to stand up against enemies who were beyond the emnetwiht.

"Should I take it?" Nephren asked, but Willem shook his head.

"This is fine," he answered as he turned to look down the hall.

There he could see light faintly pouring from deep within the darkened facility.

6. Before This World Ends—C

It was a large, plain room.

Standing in the center was a faintly glowing crystal pillar.

Countless faces were pressed against the outside of the pillar. Each one wore a different expression—a smile, sorrow, joy, sadness, surprise, calm, bewilderment, anger, fright—as they sang.

And then, suspended about halfway up at the center of the pillar, like the elaborate figurehead of a ship, was a crystal sculpture of the upper half of a girl—

"...Chanteur?"

Nephren uttered its name.

Willem had heard of it before. It was the very first of the Seventeen Beasts, one that remained shrouded in mystery for over five hundred years since its appearance to the present, and one whose menace was rarely ever spoken about.

...Someone who was once emnetwiht, who was the first in the world to be corrupted into a Beast.

"Damn it."

He took a step toward it.

Pain that felt like he would be torn apart shot through his body. In reality, though, his skin had actually been ripped off in places. And now that he thought about it, he had been covered in blood just before he had been trapped in this dreamworld.

This was the end of a happy dream.

She must have turned into a beast here—and not at the orphanage in the real world. That's why she'd vanished from her bed. And if he were to confront her now, he would have to emulate what happened to himself in the real world.

"...Stay back, Ren. If you get closer, your venenum will go into overdrive, and you'll die."

He didn't wait for a response before taking another step forward.

Wham. Something in his gut burst. He forcibly pushed the lump of blood that bubbled in his throat back down into his stomach. Just a single drop dribbled from the edge of his lips.

He was fine. Actually, he wasn't fine at all, but he could at least still walk. He drew closer to it.

He should have noticed it earlier.

Had he thought about it just a little more, he would have identified what was causing his unease.

Ever since he'd woken in this world, up until this very moment—

The girl he'd made his promise with never brought it up once.

Not a single time did the girl say to him *Welcome home*.

"Hey...*Almaria*."

He called to her, but there was no response.

Instead, he took another step forward. Every single bone in his body cracked. He used Lapidemsibilus as a cane to somehow support his collapsing carcass.

"Neither of us brought up the butter cake once."

Willem had never brought up the promise because he'd thought the world was a fake. He hadn't come home; he was just trapped. It was because of that train of thought that he never mentioned it.

But what did Almaria think? She knew nothing, so for her, Willem's return was real, and the promise he made should have been fulfilled. And yet, ever since he'd woken up until this very moment, she hadn't mentioned the promise once.

There was just one thing that could explain the inconsistency.

She herself might not have been aware, but she still knew somehow—Almaria Duffner had never been able to welcome her dad home.

— *Da...d* —

The crystal girl called out to him with a voiceless voice.

And Willem heard it clear as day.

"You're such an idiot. How long've you been waiting?"

A bitter smile spread across his face.

"You were the first one to turn into a Beast. You trapped thousands of people in a dream. You saved Gomag as it was just before the end inside of you. And you clung to it, waiting all these five hundred years?"

Another step.

Something else somewhere in his body probably broke.

His entire body was in pain, so he couldn't tell exactly where.

"Were you waiting...for me to *come back* to that world of yours...this whole time?"

That wish never could've come true.

It was a desire that never could've gone anywhere, not after five hundred years and not after an eternity.

And yet, she clung to it, singing all alone.

Like a broken music box, in a small pocket garden intricately decorated with the dreams of three thousand, after all this time.

"I'm really...really sorry, Almaria."

He took another step.

He was close enough to touch her.

He knew. If he said *I'm home* now, her wish would come true.

He would fulfill his promise of coming home in her little pocket garden.

Then, on his next birthday, she would bake him her scrumptious butter cake.

She would make him eat it until he cried from the heartburn.

Such a blissful fantasy was right before his eyes.

Willem raised the Carillon he held in his right hand high above his head.

“Initialize...adjustment...!”

The thirty-five talismans that made up the Carillon Lapidemsibilus were freed from the restrictive veins of enchantment and scattered in the air around Willem in a burst.

With his left hand, he grasped the language comprehension talisman that hung down to his chest like a pendant and ripped it from its bonds. He had never been able to take it off through the entirety of the dream, but now in Willem’s palm, it flashed brightly—

And he shoved it into Lapidemsibilus as the thirty-sixth part.

“...Ngh...”

Carillon were a phenomenon born as a result of the complicated interlocking and interference of a number of talismans’ powers. If the balance was just a little off, everything would fall apart. And so, their adjustments were originally supposed to be possible only when done by the hands of a group of skilled technicians in a well-equipped workshop.

The spinal root fissured. Almost half the veins ruptured. Venenum, now with nowhere to go, froze most of the functions that the Lapidemsibilus form originally had. He didn’t care. He forcibly connected the remaining veins, preserving the minimum amount of function. That was enough.

He struck the core crystal fragment, exiting adjustment mode. The thirty-five talismans attempted to return to their original position, creating an ugly-looking club.

He took up the sword.

The sword that protected the heart, a rough mixture of talismans to connect hearts.

And plunged it straight in.

Straight into the crystal sculpture’s chest.

— a —

The singing stopped.

Willem smiled.

“I’m sorry.”

He murmured quietly into her ear.

“I couldn’t keep my promise.”

That much was all he could convey.

A large crack ripped through the crystal statue.

It spread throughout the entire crystal pillar right before their eyes—and with the sound of thousands of ringing bells, Chanteur was destroyed.

In the split second just before it collapsed into nothing, the lips on the crystal girl were smiling faintly.

Like a saint absolving a criminal of his sins, like a daughter spoiled by her father, she smiled.



The ground shook.

The ceiling, the walls, the floor were all starting to collapse at the same time.

Willem didn't even have the strength to stand anymore. He was swallowed up by the crash and fell even farther down the strata.

A floating sensation enveloped him. At the same time, he went numb.

A loud singing voice echoed directly into his consciousness.

His entire field of vision was dyed gray.

(No...!)

It was completely unexpected. But he knew exactly what that meant right away: This was the song the people of Gomag had heard and the sight they had dreamed of.

It was the impulse that echoed at the root of the emnetwiht race that turned them into Beasts.

It was a mass of remorse, like a raging tempest. In its excessive longing for the lost past, it cut off its recollections from the real world—it created its own daydream and locked itself inside. That power and spiritual body of obsession was the very essence of Chanteur itself, the First Beast Who Laments for the Moon.

And now that it had lost Almaria as a vessel, it was forcing its way into the other person there—and the last emnetwiht left on the surface.

"Oh...right..."

Emnetwiht could turn into Beasts.

"I guess I'm not any exception, huh...?"

It wasn't anything to be surprised about. It was the inevitable conclusion, one that was just all too delayed.

What sort of Beast would he become?

Of the seventeen of them that demolished the world, which form would he take?

It didn't matter. It wasn't a problem. Nephren was right there with her Carillon. Even if Willem turned into a Beast, even if he became a thing that would bare its fangs toward Regule Aire and all who lived there, he would quickly be killed.

That was why he could smile and accept his fate.

"Willem...!!"

Something warm embraced him.

He opened his eyes. He brushed away the gray.

It was Nephren, hugging his bloodied figure.

"Wha...? Ren, what are you—?!"

The *thing* spilling from Chanteur's carcass was pouring into Willem through all his open wounds. And the same was happening to Nephren.

"You...can't... Wha...?"

He couldn't string his words together properly, but it seemed he'd conveyed his intention of a question. Nephren's eyes were squeezed shut, but she opened them slightly and looked to him.

"Almaria asked me to!" she shouted in response. "She said, *You know how he is, because he'll definitely leave and go someplace else again!* She said she would put you in my hands when that happens!"

The singing reverberating within Willem weakened her vigor.

That meant the song was now pouring into Nephren.

"She said I'd have to do something about her miserable piece-of-junk dad!"

What the hell?

When did you two hit it off?

"So that's...why...!"

The song echoed around them.

Nephren squeezed her eyes shut again.

Sheesh. What am I supposed to do? How did I end up with such kind, such strong daughters?

(Ithea. Tiat. Rhantolk. Nopht...)

His thoughts raced up beyond the sky.

(And Collon and Pannibal and Lakhesh, guess it's almost your turn, too...)

He recalled the faces of all the faerie girls in order.

The nostalgia bubbling up inside him twisted his lips.

(Might be a big pain for you, but... Our demise is in your hands now...)

He tightly gripped the warmth in his heart with all the strength he had left.

And Willem quietly closed his eyes.

7. The Girl with Crimson Hair

A lone young girl was encased in an enormous mass of ice.

She had long crimson hair. Her expression was calm and peaceful.

And on her chest was a large, deep gash from a sword.

The corpse, with what could only be a fatal wound on nothing more than a child, slept soundly, a soft smile on her face.

"...I found it."

A girl with the same crimson hair approached her from the darkness.

"Eep! That was a close one!"

The sky fish, floating before the girl, gave a slight shake of its pectoral fins to demonstrate its fear.

"We just barely made it in time. Had it taken any longer, we wouldn't have made it."

"But we did, so it's not a problem."

"There's not enough time in this situation for us to say that all's well that ends well at this point yet."

"I know."

The girl touched the mass.

Ripples spread across the surface of what was supposed to be a solid block of ice.

With a loud *splash*, what used to be an ice block transformed just a moment later into regular old water and scattered around them.

"Wah!"

The girl, now soaked from head to toe, closed her eyes, and her body shivered. The child's corpse lay haphazardly on the floor before her.

"Oh my, oh my... What a terrible wound this is. What does she make of a woman's skin, I wonder?"

"She's dead, so you don't need to worry about her skin."

"That line of thinking is meant for those with mortal life spans. Beauty isn't something you can simply disregard when it comes to little things like death. How can you be an immortal woman with such a weak point of view?"

"I don't really know, and I don't really care."

With the water splashing beneath her feet, the girl approached the corpse.

She reached out and lifted the body.

"She's cold."

"Of course. She's been in the ice this whole time."

She trailed her finger along the wound on her chest.

"...There's a really complicated enchantment cast on the wound."

"Of course there is. That wound was created by the Godslayer, the oldest holy sword Seniorious, you know. The greatest force the emnetwiht ever obtained, one that could even kill an immortal. It can turn anyone into the dead, and no one can escape from it—incarnated Visitors are no exception."

"But can I still come back to life?"

"First, we'll have to undo this curse to try anything. Such a delicately woven enchantment might be too much for me. Once we get outside, we'll search for Ebon Candle and have him do something about this."

The girl lightly brushed away the bangs on the corpse's face.

"...She's smiling."

"She is. She's having nice dreams, perhaps."

"Yeah, lots of them. There were happy dreams and sad dreams, too. They were all short but so precious."

"Lillia, was it? Do you think she ever grew to be like the girl of her dreams?"

"I dunno. I'm not sure."

Like the wind sweeping away the sand, the darkness around them began to crumble and disappear.

Her long dream was coming to an end.

"Do not let go of her hand. It's all over if you sever the connection."

"I know."

She tightly embraced the corpse.

"—It's been a long time, *me*," she whispered gently into her ear. "It's almost time to wake up."



What Will You Do at the End?
-grand guignol-

What Will You Do at the End?

-grand guignol-

Now, this is a little sudden, but Ithea Myse Valgulous was a shady girl.

Her “na-ha-ha” laugh always sounded forced, and she never showed how she really felt. Even when her companions were hurt, even when they perished, she never removed the mask of that vague smile.

That was why there was a misunderstanding among the younger girls who didn’t know her very well that she was heartless. They thought that since she always kept that smile on her face, no matter what happened to whom, she must not have any interest in anyone but herself.

And the girl in question was doing research in the reading room.

She would pull a large book from the shelf and spread it open on the table, turn the pages, cradle her head in her hands, and mutter, “This isn’t it, either...” then return the book to the shelf.

“I knew this already, but there’s only so much I can find here...”

“Are you looking for something you can’t find here?”

Rhantolk called out to her from behind, and Ithea made a silly-sounding “Nyuh!!” as she jumped in the air.

“Books on theology, is it? That doesn’t suit you at all.”

“Wh-wh-what is it, Rhan? That’s cheap, coming at me from behind like that!”

“How am I supposed to approach someone who’s practically lying facedown on the table from the front? ...It seems you’re doing quite a bit of research.”

“Oh, well, y’know, ha-ha. I’m also just wasting time on a real grand scale, see.”

She placed her hand on the back of her head and gave Rhantolk an unnatural smile.

“...The room next to yours, Ithea, is mine, by the way.”

“Huh? Sure, okay.”

“I admire your will to be strong and not cry in front of others, no matter the cost. But when you do cry in your room, I would prefer you didn’t overdo it. The walls here are very thin, so I can hear everything.”

“Are you serious?!”

It was the first time in a long while that she’d seen Ithea genuinely flustered.

"Er, then... Okay, I'll be more careful in the future, so couldja just pretend you never heard me...?"

"You didn't have to ask me twice. I won't let that strong belly cackle of yours go to waste."

Chtholly and Nephren.

It had been a little over two weeks since they'd lost their two companions—their two friends.

Everyone understood it was about time for them to start putting their emotions back in order.

They knew that, but it wasn't going very well.

By the way, a man named Willem Kmetsch was here not too long ago.

Rhantolk could spot traces of this man as she walked around the faerie warehouse, even if she didn't want to.

A hanger for a man's military uniform. A razor for a beard. A large spoon. A big bottle of spices.

Several provisions had been added to the bath-time rules. TODAY'S DESSERT had been added to the bottom of the dining hall menu that had previously been bare, but two lines had now been struck through it.

"...This is not funny."

The faerie warehouse was their house, the place they belonged, their home in all but name.

And yet, in just the two months they were away, a place so close to their hearts had been overwritten by a stranger. Why did she have to feel uncomfortable and estranged in the one place in the world that was supposed to be filled with good memories, that was supposed to let them relax?

She couldn't agree with this.

Once again, she recognized the man as an enemy.

"You saw him and talked to him, didn'tcha?" said Ithea. "You saw the officer. You could tell what kinda person he was, right? Lemme just say, he was terrible at hiding stuff and most of all, he was a simple idiot. You noticed that, right?"

"Unfortunately, I only ever saw the capable, very active, and devoted sides of him." Rhantolk shook her head. "I cannot pass judgment on the basis of such biased information. My conclusions will be warped."

"...You're a pain. I knew that already, though."

Be quiet.

"Glick said all the good ones die first," spoke Nopht after resting her hands that had been crafting a melody on the old piano.

She was without her sword now, since Chtholly took Desperatio with her, so for the moment, she was a weaponless faerie. That wasn't exactly the cause of it, but she hadn't cut her hair for a while now. Her very short hair had grown just a bit in these two weeks.

"That's why I'm pretty sure that emnetwiht was a good guy."

"That logic is very faulty, but it does sound convincing. The only dug weapon-compatible ones left safe here are, of all people, Ithea and myself."

"Hey, c'mon, you have to add Tiat to that list."

"...Oh, right."

To be quite honest, her only impression of Tiat was that of a tiny little faerie who was constantly trying to follow in Chtholly's footsteps. She hadn't even imagined that such a small girl would be standing alongside them to fight.

But that's how things were.

Time was always flowing, and things were always changing.

And the people who stood still would always be left behind—or perhaps be pushed along by the flow.

"And this isn't the end for me. My life was saved. You think I'm gonna put that to waste? I'm gonna give my all to put my life to good use."

Nopht began playing the next song. It was a bright piece with a quick tempo. She either chose the song to reflect how she felt, or it was out of consideration for Rhantolk.

"It does seem quite fun to give up on the past and live looking forward," Rhantolk muttered as she lay her head down on the desk and basked her heart in the comforting melody.



It was in an endless gray wasteland.

There, Willem opened his eyes.

"...Rgh..."

He closed his eyes straightaway.

All his senses were off. His sight wasn't functioning as it should. The same went for his hearing and touch and everything else. It was almost like his physical body had been transformed into an entirely different creature. His senses and consciousness weren't meshing together correctly. Everything felt so *wrong*, he even felt like he was going to throw up.

...Wait, it wasn't an *almost like* situation. He *had* been changed.

Something like a flame was burning deep inside his consciousness. It was anger, hatred, an enigmatic urge to kill the green earth and all the moving and living people and everything else like it.

Ohhh, so all the Beasts harbor this inside them. I get it now.

Of course the world would be destroyed. Because I want to destroy things so badly.

He couldn't stand the thought that there were still living people out there, that there were still things not yet broken. They were all stains that clung to their gray mother earth. They were things that should not exist, things that needed to be erased.

Surely, this was an impulse engraved deeply into this very body of his. The only way he could escape it was to lock himself inside a dream.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

He stood.

Beneath the twinkling stars in the night sky, a beautiful gray desert lay before him.

He was home. That joy—that comfort—spread within his heart.

It was in the dark of night.

There, a lone Beast gave its first cries in the center of a gray expanse.

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